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THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

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CASTLEVANIA: RONDO OF BLOOD
MUSHROOM MEN: THE SPORE WARS

THE EVOLUTION OF SHINOBI

NINJA MASTERS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF SEGA'S SHURIKEN-FUELLED SERIES

THE MAKING OF DESCENT
BEHIND THE SCENES OF INTERPLAY'S SCI-FI HIT

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THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SHINOBI GAME?

DARRAN JONES

The arcade original is amazing, but it's *Shinobi III: Revenge Of The Ninja Master* that I always find myself returning to.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Ninja Gaiden: Ragebound*
Favourite game of all time: *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast*

TIM EMPEY

The original game for me, it just looked so much better than many of its contemporaries.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they go
Currently playing: *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers*
Favourite game of all time: *God Hand*

NICK THORPE

My head says *Shinobi III: Revenge Of The Ninja Master*, but my heart says *Alex Kidd In Shinobi World*. It's one of the Master System's best games ever, after all.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog*

ANDY SALTER

The first and only *Shinobi* game I've played was *The Revenge Of Shinobi* which came on the *Sega Classics Arcade Collection* that was bundled with my Mega-CD.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently modding: *RTR: Imperium Surrectum*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War* although I guess it's the *Remastered* edition now

PAUL ROSE

The Revenge Of Shinobi! It was the game which for me first justified buying a Mega Drive.
Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: *Kingdom Rush Alliance+.*
Favourite game of all time: *Half-Life 2*

GRAEME MASON

The Revenge Of Shinobi, one of my first Mega Drive games. It has one of my favourite game soundtracks of all time.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Tyvarian 2*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil 4*

DAVID CROOKES

Shinobi III: Return Of The Ninja Master is not only the best of the bunch in my opinion, it's also one of my favourite Mega Drive games. Challenging and fun.
Expertise: Amstrad, Lynx, adventures, *Dizzy* and PlayStation 2 (but is it retro? Debate!)
Currently playing: *World Series Baseball*
Favourite game of all time: *Broken Sword*

ANDREW FISHER

I'll always pick the excellent C64 conversion by Simon Pick and Ned Langman.
Expertise: Forty years of gaming, from Commodore 64 to Switch
Currently playing: *O*
Favourite game of all time: *Wizball*

RORY MILNE

For pure nostalgia I'll pick the Master System *Shinobi*. With hindsight it's far from perfect, but at the time it felt like you were playing the coin-op at home.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Wizball*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

LOADING...

When you're in an arcade every game has its own way to catch your attention, and your coins. Some use over-the-top sounds or dramatic in-game scenes to entice you in – *Shinobi* used both of these, as well as a pair of eyes.

It was those menacing eyes that really drew me to Sega's game, dramatic-looking eyes from the game's lead, Joe Musashi, who was silently challenging me, "Come and have a go… if you think you're hard enough." Well it turns out I was hard enough and I quickly became very good at Sega's game, much to the annoyance of my local Circle K.

Sega's franchise has had many ups and downs over the years, from the glorious heights of the Mega Drive games, to the disappointment that was *The Cyber Shinobi*. The iconic ninja is now returning to modern systems thanks to *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance* so we've spoken to creatives old and new to find out why Sega's iconic franchise remains so popular with gamers.

This month also sees us teaming up with GOG.com who do a fantastic job of not only making classic games available via its new GOG Preservation Program but ensuring they are free of DRM as well. So look out for a badge highlighting any compatible games in each issue and take advantage of a special 20% discount off your first purchase on page 110.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine.

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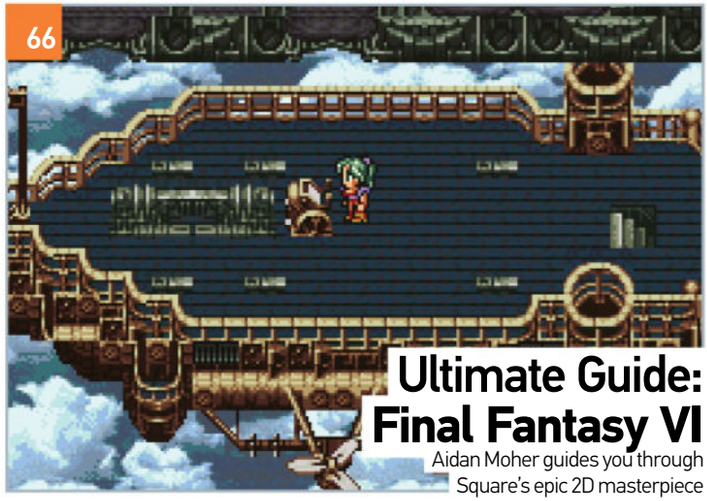

Ultimate Guide: Final Fantasy VI
Aidan Moher guides you through Square's epic 2D masterpiece

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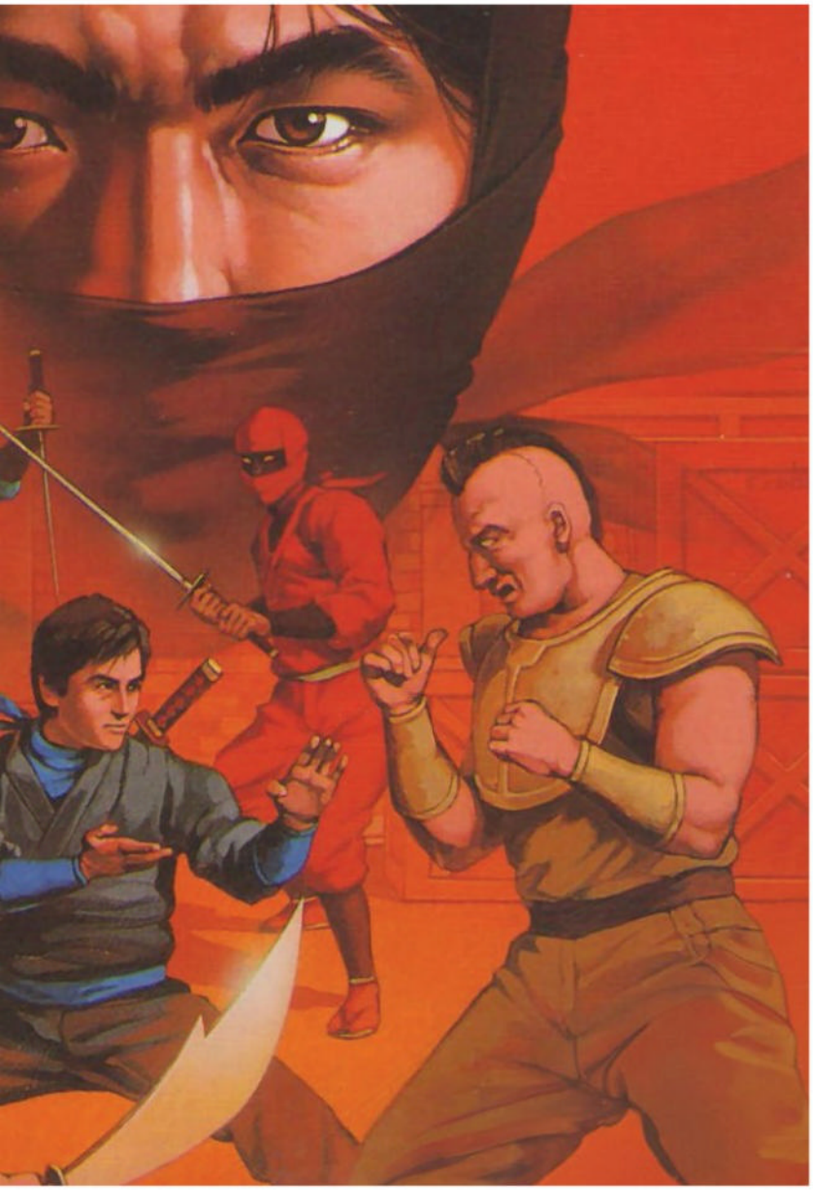

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The Making Of: Frontier: Elite II

David Braben on creating a sequel to his ground-breaking space odyssey

» The G'AIM'E offers an authentic *Time Crisis* experience with very little set up. Welcome to the future.

GUNNING FOR SUCCESS

Nick goes hands-on with an incoming AI-powered lightgun

» The Atari 2600 is one of seven systems that features on *Atari 50: The Anniversary Collection*.

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Nick takes the G'AIM'E lightgun for a spin, but will it meet his standards?

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Nick's dropped down in another month, but don't worry, he's remembered to pay for parking

As much as we enjoy gaming on modern systems, one thing we don't enjoy is the lack of old-fashioned lightgun games. It makes sense as new TVs simply aren't equipped to play them and while there was a revival during the Wii era and even during the rise of VR, modern TVs have always held the genre back, meaning gamers have had to rely on solutions like the Sinden Lightgun for LCD-related lightgun thrills. The incoming G'AIM'E gun by Tassei Denki looks to change that.

After a successful Kickstarter campaign that raised an astonishing £620K, we've now had a chance for a hands-on play of the device and first impressions are very good indeed. The gun itself looks very similar to the old PlayStation Gun-Cons, although much lighter and not quite as big. Despite its overall lightness it feels well made and features side-mounted buttons and even kickback. This recoil action did feel a bit subdued though, so if you're expecting the kind of punch you get from an arcade lightgun game you may be disappointed. The gun feels very good in the hands and we had no issues with cramp, even after a long play session.

» [Arcade] Outside of the recent Arcade1UP version, the G'AIM'E is the only way you can currently enjoy an official arcade version of *Time Crisis*.

> "Despite its overall lightness it feels well made and features side-mounted buttons and even kickback"

Of course, looks aren't everything and the most important thing is how well the device actually works. Setting up the G'AIM'E is a breeze and it requires far less effort than anything that's come out post CRTs. The calibration is straightforward, requiring you to point at eight targets around the screen (the four corners and north, south, east and west). Tracking is of a very high standard and we didn't notice any lag while playing. When we first played *Time Crisis* we were struggling to hit targets, but once we switched over to using a cursor sight we realised we were just rusty as our accuracy went massively up. We did notice a little jitter during play occasionally, but that could have been due to the set up being lower than we would have had it at home.

Accuracy hasn't just been saved for the peripheral though, as the arcade emulation is also of a very high standard. The games all looked arcade perfect with all the sounds and visuals carried over intact. In short, if it wasn't for the fact we were standing in front of a modern TV we could have sworn we were playing the arcade game, it felt that authentic.

So you now know that the G'AIM'E is a very nice bit of kit, but

» While it is well made, the pedal had a tendency to slip while we were using it.

what about the insides? We spoke to a G'AIM'E development team member who told us, "It uses a built-in camera and has an efficient AI model to recognise the screen in real-time. Combined with precision motion sensors (MEMS), it can calculate where the gun is pointing with high accuracy."

Of course, AI is quickly becoming a dirty word in videogame circles (and many other creative areas) so we were interested in how it has been applied to the G'AIM'E. "The AI functions much like a seasoned expert – whether an art appraiser or a structural engineer," we're told. "Through extensive training involving thousands of learning iterations, the AI develops a kind of intuitive judgment, shaped by experience rather than rote memory. When faced with new data, it doesn't retrieve a specific past example; instead, it draws on its internalised expertise to make direct assessments."

Perhaps one of the most interesting choices behind the new lightgun is why the team has decided to effectively make a mini-console rather than simply releasing the impressive peripheral for existing platforms. "It's to ensure users have the best gaming experience," we're told. "The G'AIM'E is designed to deliver a user journey that stays true to the original arcade spirit while maintaining tight control over quality and performance."

While we like the idea of a compact all-in-one device, an insistence of keeping away from modern consoles and PC suggests it won't be too long before other branded G'AIM'Es are announced. After all, we'd love to play a dedicated *The House Of The Dead* version or even a Taito collection with gems like *Operation Wolf* on it. We've seen this approach from the likes of Hyper Mega Tech! with its Super Pocket range and while it makes sense from a publisher's perspective it means you end up with multiple devices that all fundamentally do the same thing.

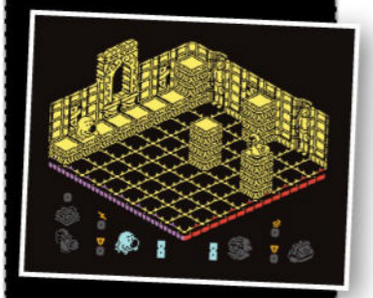
Despite the small selection of games that are included, we've been impressed with the G'AIM'E. The tracking is excellent, the emulation is of a very high standard and it features some genuinely great games. Granted, the base version seems rather underwhelming at £99, especially as you can't add more games, and there's no denying that the premium package at £200 is going to be too much for some, but it's great to see iconic lightgun classics in an official capacity and running like a dream.

» The hub only has two front USB ports, so you'll have to swap between the pedal and second gun.

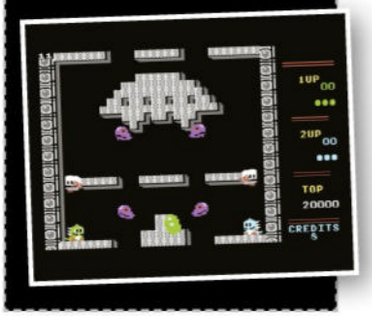
» The Basic package costs £99.99 and includes *Time Crisis*, the Premium package is £139.99 and adds *Point Blank* and *Steel Gunner 1* and *2*, while the Ultimate package is £199.99 and adds a second gun.

PETER CLARKE PASSES

The website Remix64 recently announced the passing of Peter Clarke, who was not only a prolific creator of SID tunes during the C64's glory days, but also had a significant presence in the modern C64 remix scene. Peter worked on the soundtracks for numerous C64 games, including Ocean's *Head Over Heels*, *Double Take*, *Tai-Pan* and Ocean Loader 3, as well as Firebird's *Bubble Bobble*, *Denarius*, *Gunstar*, *The Mystery Of The Nile* and *Kinetik*, as well as Elite's *Scooby-Doo*. "We at Remix64, and the entire Commodore retro and remix community will miss him dearly," commented the popular website. "Rest in peace, Pete, and may you delight the heavens with your harmonies." Our thoughts go out to Peter's friends and family at this difficult time.



» [C64] Peter Clarke created the music for *Head Over Heels* and *Bubble Bobble* (below).



Who is Mike Mika?
Mike Mika's official videogame career began in the Nineties, working on Game Boy Color titles like *Klax* and *Alice In Wonderland*. He's now the studio head of Digital Eclipse, a studio acclaimed for its reverential treatment of classic games.

House Of The Rat

Chuck E Cheese wasn't just a restaurant, it was the premier videogame venue in America, cofounded by none other than Mr Atari himself: Nolan Bushnell. You didn't go for the food, which could best be described as pizza-adjacent cardboard garnished with burnt pepperoni. But the soda – oh, the soda – flowed endlessly from plastic pitchers. If your parents loved you at all, they booked your birthday there.

My friend Craig and I were what you might call Cheesers. We didn't build friendships so much as collect birthday RSVPs. That was the thing. It didn't matter if we liked the birthday kid. We could actively despise the kid. The point was the games. If you were even thinking about booking a party at the House Of The Rat, we were suddenly your best friend, attached to your side until that sweet, sweet invitation was secured. And once the date was set, we were ready.

Chuck E Cheese smelled like a cocktail of cigarettes, cheese and sweaty socks. The floor was always sticky. You learned to keep your shoes on. Kids who emerged barefoot from the Cheese Maze or ball pit regretted it instantly. The décor leaned hard into Seventies wood panelling, and the walls were lined with propaganda posters urging us to play more, eat more, obey. And then… the tokens arrived. Gold-plated proxies for real money: One token, one play. The moment they hit the table, it was a frenzy of grabby hands.

Veterans had a strategy. Hits like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* were hopeless unless you could elbow past kids twice your size. So we made a beeline for the weird stuff: *Pooyan*, *Wizard Of Wor* and Craig's favourite: *Kaos*. Overlooked, underplayed and somehow more alluring. There, we could actually get good. No older kid hovering, no running commentary on how much we sucked.

At the top of every hour the animatronic main attraction himself, with his weird band – a cross between *Country Bear Jamboree* and something from *Black Mirror* – would emerge from behind tracked curtains. They'd sing songs for their guests, but for Craig and I, it was a tactical distraction that enabled us to play the good games. Blasting space bugs in *Galaga* while robots sang *On Top Of Spaghetti* was peak Cheeser.

If we were lucky, the real Charles Entertainment Cheese would show up for photos. Standard procedure, except for one time. To this day, no one knows what triggered it. Maybe it was the thousandth reminder not to attack Chuck. Maybe the soda was extra caffeinated. Whatever the cause, Craig, in a moment of inspired bad judgment, decided it would be hilarious to knock off Chuck's oversized head mid-photo.

Chaos. Shrieks erupted. A blurry photo captured an angry and horrified teenager mid-decapitation. Several kids were left traumatised. Craig was banned for life and quietly blacklisted from all future parties. He called it a small price to pay. "There are other Chuck E Cheeses," he shrugged later. "And other birthdays."

Chuck E Cheese was Vegas for the under-12 set. Nowhere else could you mainline soda, gorge on pizza and rack up dozens of plays in one delirious stretch. Whether the creepy animatronic side-eye or a chaperone too tipsy to drive home, it all blurs together now, into something special.

I don't know what became of Craig after elementary school, but I like to imagine him, decades beyond the reach of any standing sanctions, eyeing those new adults-only Chuck E Cheese arcades, quietly plotting his triumphant return. *

> "Chuck E Cheese smelled like a cocktail of cigarettes, cheese and sweaty socks. The floor was always sticky"

Do you agree with Mike's thoughts? Contact us at:

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RETURN OF THE PAC

ATARI REVEALS A BRAND-NEW ATARI 7800 VERSION OF PAC-MAN

Namco and Atari have recently announced that *Pac-Man Double Feature* is due for later this year. It not only includes a brand-new 7800 version of the classic Namco game, but also contains the infamous Atari 2600 release for £26.24. Additionally, Atari has announced a brand-new version of its Atari 2600+ in Pac-Man Yellow, as well as a collection of wireless joysticks in the colours of Pac-Man and the game's four iconic ghosts. The system will retail for £127.48, while the joysticks are going to be available at £29.99 each or £149.95 if you'd prefer a set of all five sticks.

That's not all though, as the 7800 versions of *Xevious*, *Dig Dug* and *Galaga* are also being re-released for later in the year and will also sport a £26.24 price point. These won't be enhanced versions, but reissues of the original 7800 games.

Finally, all four games will also be available as a limited edition box set that will cost £127.48. While this is admittedly more expensive, the set will contain exclusive extras.

» [Atari 7800] This new version of *Pac-Man* looks far more authentic than the original Atari 2600 version.

A LINK TO THE CAST

Nintendo recently announced its two stars for its planned live-action *The Legend Of Zelda* movie. Bo Bragson will be playing Princess Zelda and Benjamin Evan Ainsworth will be playing Link. Bragson has appeared in TV shows like *Renegade Nell* and *The Jetty*, while Ainsworth has featured in *The Haunting Of Bly Manor* and *Son Of A Critch*. The film is planned for release in 2027.

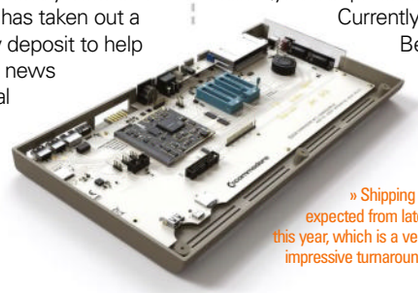
» It's great to see a new FPGA-based Commodore 64. Will you be preordering one?

RESURRECTING AN ICON

THE COMMODORE BRAND IS RETURNING

With the success of Atari in recent years, it's not surprising to learn that Commodore is the next iconic brand to be resurrected. Overseen by YouTuber Christian 'Peri Fractic' Simpson, who has taken out a loan and used his house as a security deposit to help fund the seven-figure acquisition, the news is exciting and perplexing fans in equal measure. After all, numerous rights for everything from C64 ROMs to the Amiga brand are still held by the likes of Cloanto and Amiga Corporation meaning rights negotiation will still be a thing depending on what the new team hopes to bring back. First up is a planned Commodore 64 Ultimate, an FPGA-based system that is already gaining plenty of traction online (you can preorder it from commodore.net).

Currently priced at $299.99 for the BASIC Beige model the new device looks like a great way to access the Commodore 64's vast library and will include an HDMI connection, built-in games and the ability to load more via a USB drive. Needless to say, we'll definitely be keeping an eye on this.



» Shipping is expected from later this year, which is a very impressive turnaround.

M2 REVEALS A NEW SEQUEL

The coding gods at M2 have revealed they're working on a sequel to a Taito arcade blaster from 1989. *Night Striker Gear* is due out later this year and looks like it will be a cracking follow-up to the hardcore blaster which originally received ports to the PlayStation and Saturn. M2 also has a compilation out now featuring four games, including *Night Striker* and *Operation Wolf*.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance counsellor who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. You can get more information about Iain by visiting iainleecounselling.com or heading over to patreon.com/iainandKatherine

Games are great. You know they are, they really are

I was lucky enough to become friends with both Chris Sievey and Frank Sidebottom. I say both because they were very different people. Chris was a laid back, world-weary creative, always ready to jump on the next idea and push it forward however nuts it was. Some took, others fell by the wayside. Frank was a hyperactive child with an unfortunately large head. His grasp on reality was limited to space, robots and Paul McCartney. He was constantly chasing fame and sadly never made it.

Chris died in 2010 aged just 54 years old. I like to believe Frank is still alive out there, entertaining the people of Timperley and forgetting to go to the electricity board to pay the bill, instead spending the money on sweets and *Thunderbirds* stuff.

We all know Chris' history with games. I bring up the electricity bill story because Chris actually did that. Except he brought home a ZX81, telling his exasperated wife this was going to make them rich. He wrote some incredible games including a multiplayer one where you and your mates would point at a blank screen then hit space. A small dot would then randomly appear and whoever was closest won. Genius.

We all know *The Biz*, the rockstar emulator and I'd imagine everyone has played the *Camouflage* video on YouTube. You'd load up the tape, put a record on the turntable and hit play when the music started. If you haven't seen it, I won't spoil it for you. Put this magazine down now and go and check it. You will not be disappointed.

Chris told me that one day everyone would have their own TV channel. This was in 2008. I didn't understand it at the time, but of course he was right. Twitch, YouTube, TikTok… everyone can now broadcast anything they want. Some get tens of thousands of views. Others may get one if they're lucky. For some they want it to be a career while the majority just want to share with other people.

There are an infinite number of videogame channels. Some of the highlights for me are Kim Justice, DJ Slopes, Rose Tinted Spectrum, Ctrl Alt Rees, Colin Hoad etc, etc, etc. I could fill this column just listing them all. Oh, side note. I've followed Rose Tinted Spectrum for a while and it was only last week when I was walking past Timpsons in Aylesbury that I got the pun. Rose Tinted Spectacles. Yay me.

It's hard for some of these channels to get any traction. So may I point you to a new one? Gaming Views Pod with Dan and Dan is a fairly new delight. I get asked about 15 times every day to appear on someone's pod. I just don't have the time to do them all. However, I checked out their channel and podcast and it was very good. But they only have 30 subscribers. So do them a favour and subscribe. And Chris – miss you man. Miss you a lot. Thank you. ✱

"Chris told me that one day everyone would have their own TV channel. This was in 2008. I didn't understand it at the time, but of course he was right"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Year of the Spectrum

1984. It's an iconic year, thanks to George Orwell. In computer and videogames terms, however, it was a mixed bag. Globally, the Famicom was the biggest-selling games system, but it was still only available in Japan. In the US, the market was sputtering. Sales of home gaming systems had fallen, and many believed that the videogame 'fad' was all but over. Little did they know...

Here in the UK, things were a touch rosier, thanks to the ZX Spectrum. All ten of the best-selling games that year were Speccy titles – and I've played all but one of them (*Night Gunner*, if you must know – I couldn't tell you a thing about it). The reason I've kind of zeroed in on 1984 is that I was curious to see what I would've been playing that year.

You see, for my family – at least until a couple of recent annus horribilies (I've checked: that is the plural!) – it was probably the worst year of our lives. Without wanting to bring things down too much in what is generally a light and breezy magazine, let's just say we had a lot of funerals that year, and all of those funerals were pretty heavy. I mean, I know that funerals aren't fun in general, but we're not talking saying goodbye to 94 year olds here.

My main memory of that year – aside from a long-planned trip to visit my sister and her husband in California – is how it was all a blur. I was 13, and everyone around me was struggling. I felt a bit lost among all that, trying to make sense of the huge meteorite that had landed in our midst. If you asked me before I checked, I'd have said I didn't play any games that year. I kind of just remember sleepwalking through it all.

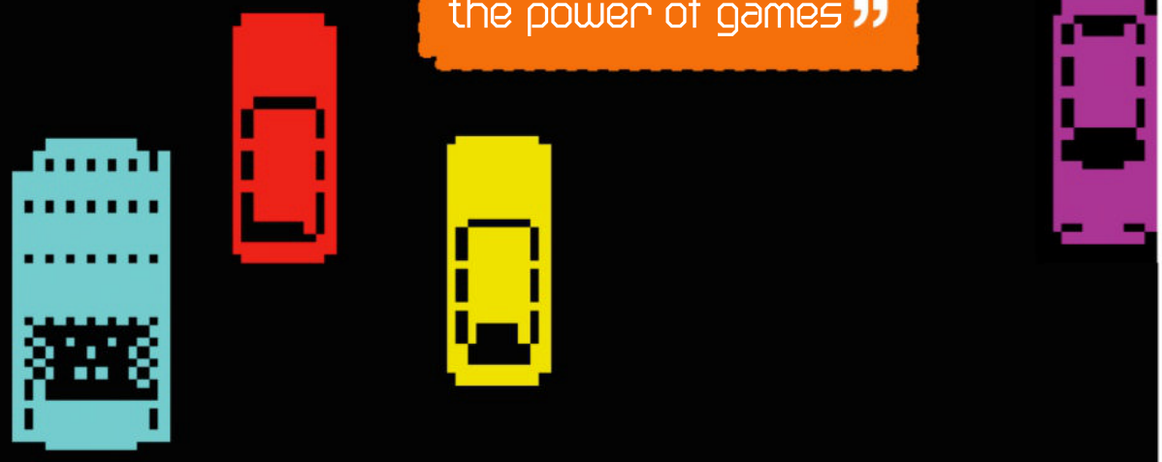
And yet... that was the year that *Jet Set Willy*, *Knight Lore*, *Underwurlde*, *Sabre Wulf*, *Trashman*, *Skool Daze*, *Pyjamarama*, *Tir Na Nog*, and *Tornado Low Level* all came out. Those were my games that year, and I can remember playing every last one of them for the first time.

There was another game that had a big impact on me: *Dragon's Lair*. I just looked it up, and it released in the arcades in June 1983. I'd seen pictures of it in magazines, but I didn't see one running until our local May bank holiday festival, which must have been May 1984. It was set up beneath a marquee, and I was utterly transfixed.

What's telling is how I don't remember playing any of those games and feeling any of the all-consuming grief and confusion that had washed through my family.

I just remember being lost in them, becoming transported into their worlds. That, to me, is testament to the power of games. Not only do they have the capacity to transport us to other worlds, to transform us into other people, but they can – if only for as long as they last – make you forget the most crippling pain imaginable. What magic they have. *

> "I just remember being lost in them, becoming transported into their worlds. That, to me, is testament to the power of games"



Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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» Henning says Badger Punch Games are "thrilled to release *Roguecraft DX* as Evercade's second single-game cartridge".

» Henning Ludvigsen is the pixel artist behind *Roguecraft DX* and has worked on versions of the game since 2022.

Roguecraft DX

Henning Ludvigsen on updating an Amiga homebrew classic for the Evercade

> "Roguecraft has been a fun passion project and a big part of our lives since 2022"
>
> **HENNING LUDVIGSEN**

If you've already seen our review section you'll see that we've been very impressed with *Roguecraft DX*. Badger Punch Games' Henning Ludvigsen explains how the popular roguelike has evolved over several years.

Can you tell us how *Roguecraft DX* started off?

It began with *Rogue4K*, a game Ricki [Sickenger] made for a charity jam where entries had to fit within 4,000 bytes. The game was well received, so we quickly created an improved version: *Rogue64*. It launched digitally and as a big box cartridge and performed well, even becoming a popular free title on the Evercade.

What made you remake the game for the Amiga?

The success of *Rogue64* made us want to 'ride the wave', and moving to the 16-bit Amiga felt natural. We met in the Amiga demoscene in the mid-Nineties and were eager to give our beloved Amiga a proper go. I also wasn't happy with how *Rogue64* looked and wanted something with more visual flair. We do everything for fun – if we're not excited about a project, we move on. This was a completely mutual, organic decision, and we were genuinely excited to return to our Amiga roots.

How long did that version take and what challenges did you face?

We both have busy lives and full-time jobs, so making games for retro computers happens whenever we find time – often late at night. The initial *Roguecraft* version took about two years to develop, though the work was sporadic. If it were our full-time job, it might've taken just a few months. But taking our time lets ideas mature and leads to better decisions – something we consider a strength.

What other games/media inspired *Roguecraft*?

Roguecraft is heavily based on our game *Rogue64*, but also draws clear inspiration from Lovecraftian mythos – hence the name (there's no crafting; it's a play on words). We've also drawn from classic fantasy and role-playing, adding humour and our own twist to these influences.

» Henning Ludvigsen and Ricki Sickenger (right) first met on the Amiga demoscene.

» *Roguecraft DX* is on sale now and is reviewed on page 90.

The game's pixel work is truly gorgeous, how long do sprites typically take to create?
This was our first Amiga game, so everything involved trial and error, with continuous iterations over time. The environment required the most effort and rework before we settled on a system and templates to build from. The game uses only 32 colours, covering player characters, monsters, level assets, backgrounds, pick-ups, effects, UI and more. It took months of iteration to create a palette flexible enough for all graphical elements.

How hard was it to balance *Roguecraft*'s three different playable characters?
Some things happen behind the scenes that players might not notice. The three player classes also act as difficulty levels. They have different max stats, level-up speeds and face adjusted monster stats to reflect difficulty. Since only one character is played at a time, the focus was on making each feel distinct and progressively more challenging. This balance developed naturally during testing and earlier builds.

How did the Evercade version come about?
Blaze Entertainment had already published *Rogue64* as a free title, which did very well with the Evercade community. With *Roguecraft* receiving strong reviews and selling well on Amiga, approaching Blaze was a natural choice. Fortunately, they were very interested. We all saw the potential for a special Evercade edition early on. With the timeline set, we added features to extend gameplay, add variety and, most importantly, increase replayability. This is a game meant to be picked up repeatedly, starting as relaxing escapism and evolving into a strategic puzzle as you delve deeper into the dungeon.

How long have you been working on it and what challenges have you faced?
Roguecraft has been a fun passion project and a big part of our lives since 2022. We aimed for it to run on a stock Amiga 500 – and it did, until the final stages, when we needed a bit more memory. Exhausted and not expecting the game to do as well as it did, we released it with a small memory requirement and called it done. Fitting everything on a 720KB Double Density floppy was another major constraint. For the Evercade version, most of those limits were gone. With ample memory and storage, development was much less restrictive. The DX version still runs on original Amiga hardware, though it needs some extra memory.

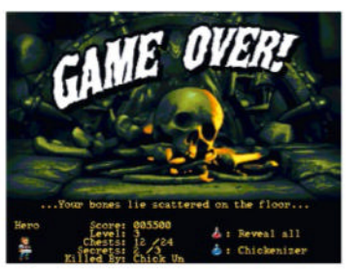
What does the Evercade version offer over the Amiga version?
The *DX* version has 15 levels (up from 10), nearly double the room variants, and new level art – including exterior wilderness areas before entering Mordecoom's dungeons. We added more monsters – some quite tough – and tweaked existing ones to make them more interesting. Player classes were improved too. For example, the Rogue now has a backstab ability. Amiga mod legend Jogeir Liljedahl composed several new music tracks to keep you motivated.

Is there the possibility to add additional levels and characters due to the Evercade range being online?
This is technically possible, but not something we currently have planned. Still, it's good to have the option in case it becomes relevant in the future. The game already offers plenty of variation through our procedural dungeon generation, making each playthrough unique. ✱

» [Evercade] Henning says, "The animations can look a bit janky, but we've embraced that. A bit of jank adds charm."

» [Evercade] Badger Punch Games have added a large amount of new content to *Roguecraft DX* and also fine-tuned existing features.

» [Evercade] The Evercade version of *Roguecraft* features a nice CRT look for added retro authenticity.



» [Evercade] According to Henning, making homebrew games is, "driven by passion and happens in bursts".

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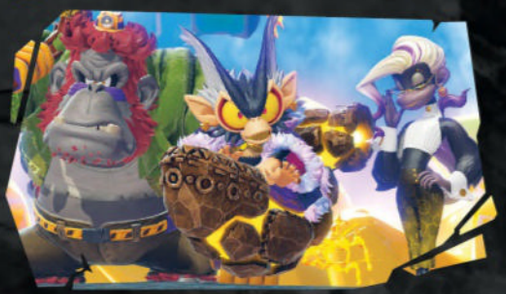

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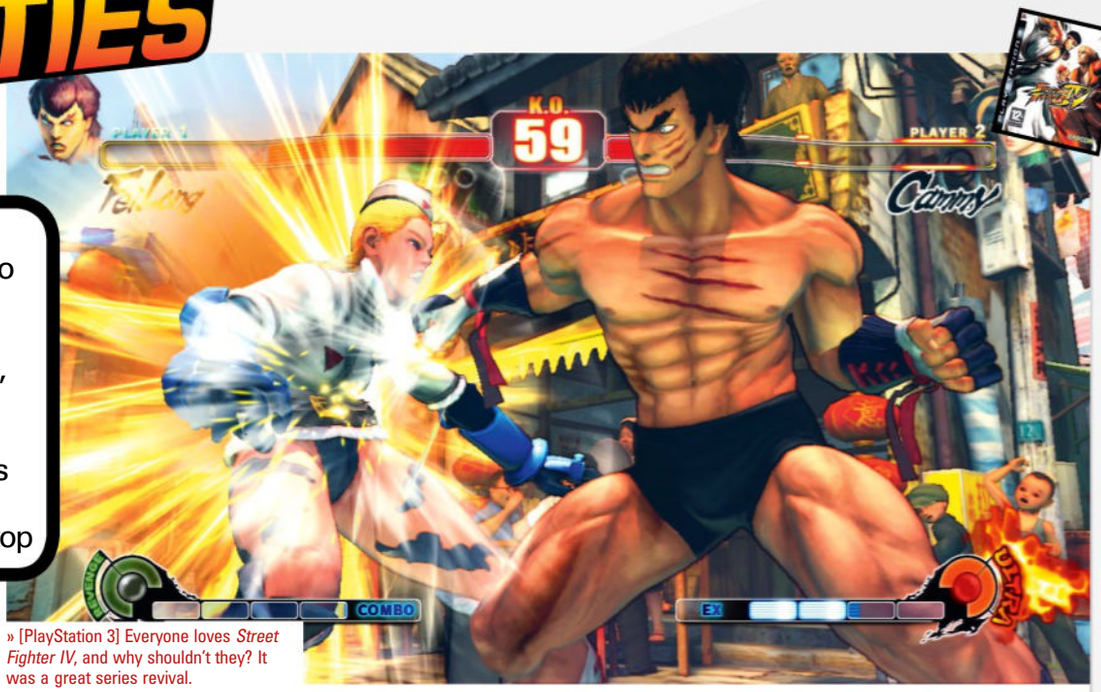
BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES



» [PlayStation 3] Everyone loves *Street Fighter IV*, and why shouldn't they? It was a great series revival.

MARCH 2009 – As the global economy continues to suffer, people are turning to violence – whether it's guns or fists, humans or zombies, everyone's looking to take out their frustrations. Nick Thorpe just wants to know when all the fighting is going to stop

NEWS MARCH 2009

Gloomy economic news continued throughout the month. On 18 March, The Office For National Statistics announced that the number of unemployed people in the UK had risen by 165,000 in the three months to January. This took the unemployment rate to 6.5% and the total number of unemployed people to 2.03 million, the highest figure since 1997. Figures also showed that earnings growth averaged at just 1.8% in 2008, the lowest rate since records began in 1991. On 24 March, the Consumer Price Index showed inflation at a rate of 3.2% in February, defying the predictions of economists, and on 27 March, official figures showed that the UK economy shrank by 1.6% in the final quarter of 2008.

Reality TV star Jade Goody passed away from cervical cancer on 22 March, at the age of 27. Though she had been a controversial figure during her time in the spotlight, most notably when accused of racism in the 2007 series of Celebrity Big Brother, she did much to raise awareness of cervical cancer following her diagnosis. The NHS reported a 12% increase in 25-64-year-old women undergoing pap testing later in 2009, after years of decline.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM MARCH 2009

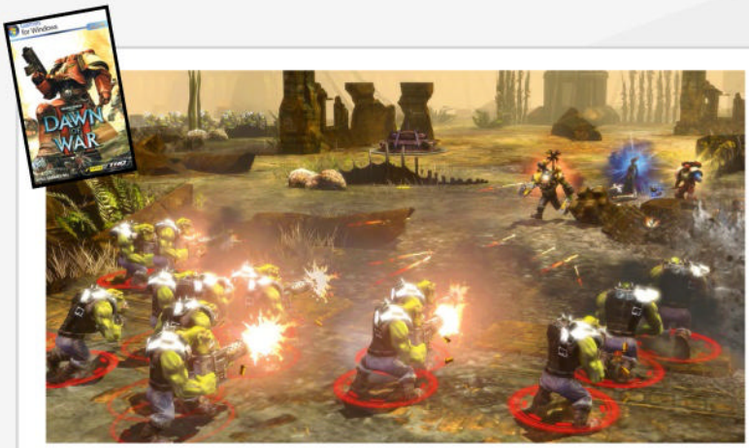
***Street Fighter IV* came up for review this month, and it had been a long time since Capcom's fighting franchise had felt so relevant, as it claimed scores of 10/10 from *X360*, 5/5 from *360*, 95% from *Play* and 9/10 each from *Official Xbox 360 Magazine* and *Official PlayStation Magazine*.** "Capcom has achieved the impossible and delivered a videogame that not only sets new standards for the genre, but also proves that it's perfectly possible to put a brand-new spin on an old classic," enthused our own Darran in *Play*. Tim reviewed it for *360*, and said, "There aren't many other games that are as friendly to new players as they are to the more advanced crowd."

If you preferred combat of a less close and personal style, you could always try *FEAR 2: Project Origin*, a game *Play* described as "a balanced FPS as creepy in places as it is action-packed in others" in an 87% review. It was warmly welcomed by other publications too, earning scores of 8/10 each from *Total PC Gaming*, *Edge*, *games™* and *OPM*, 78% from *PC Gamer*, 7/10 from *OXM* and 9/10 from *X360* last month. *360* said that, "The enemies still flip over tables and are quite good at winding you up by not staying still when you're aiming for their heads, but it's all just too similar to the original game," ultimately concluding that it "feels like just another expansion pack".

» [Xbox 360] We're not sure what this was before, but it's just blood and guts now.

Over on the PlayStation 3, an exclusive FPS arrived in the form of *Killzone 2*. After an exclusive 9/10 review in *OPM* last month, it got 93% in *Play*, 8/10 in *games™* and 7/10 in *Edge* this month. The division came over the game's innovation, or lack of it. "Now and again, someone just needs to raise the bar by focussing on the basics and taking them to new heights," *Play* argued. "*Killzone 2* does just that. It won't ever take you outside the comfort zone of FPS tradition, but it will raise your expectations of PlayStation 3 titles still to come." *Edge* felt that, "If you can't think for yourself after so many millions of dollars have been spent, surely it's common courtesy to make your clichés interesting."

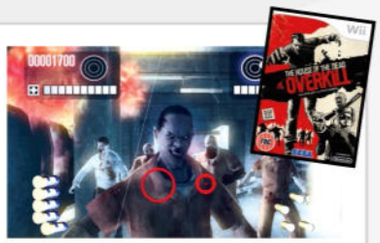
Xbox 360 owners were treated to a new *Halo* – but this was *Halo*



» [PC] Those green guys are orcs, the ones who want "more dakka", right? Yeah, we know our stuff.

Wars, a real-time strategy spin-off of the hit shooter series. It got 9/10 from *OXM*, 8/10 from *X360*, 4/5 from *360* and 7/10 each from *Edge* and *games™*. *OXM* said that "it's so richly infused with the spirit of the series that if you're a hardcore *Halo* fan, you'll enjoy it whether you like RTS games or not", and felt that it offered "immediacy and accessibility" to existing RTS fans. In its more reserved review, *games™* concluded, "Microsoft's first risk with the *Halo* franchise is a mild success, lingering close to the source material but maintaining just enough real-time strategy trademarks to make a positive step in a different direction."

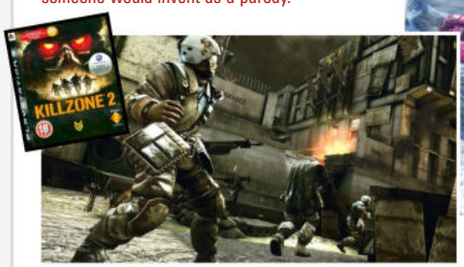
Sega was looking to shake up the Wii's kid-friendly image with *The House Of The Dead: Overkill*, a gory, foul-mouthed entry in the famous lightgun franchise. *Official Nintendo Magazine* gave it 90%, *NGamer* 82%, *Edge* 8/10 and *games™* was less impressed with a 6/10. The official magazine said, "It's frantic, it's hugely satisfying and (assuming you're a high-score chaser) it'll last you ages," concluding that, "*Overkill* is the most offensive, outrageous game we've played and we love it." Compared to *Ghost Squad* and *Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles*, *games™* felt it to be comparatively non-interactive. "It's like a fairground shooting gallery in this respect, exciting to a degree, but try to shoot anything that isn't obviously a target and you're wasting your time."



» [Wii] Sega couldn't do *Overkill* in arcades because of all the swearing.

PC players also got in on the warfare. *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War II* scored 9/10 in *Total PC Gaming*, which said, "You get the feeling that Relic partly designed *Dawn Of War II* to attract casual players not that familiar with the genre, rather than for the hardcore. But if games are developed to have a wider appeal then this is how it should be done, with enough accessibility and depth to keep both sides of the gamer coin more than happy." That added to the 82% it received in *PC Gamer* last month.

Join us again next month, when we hope peace will be free. ✱



» [PlayStation 3] A brown-looking FPS called *Killzone 2* almost feels like a game someone would invent as a parody.

» [Xbox 360] Hey, here's a *Halo* game even Nick could play, thanks to its overhead view.

CHARTS

MARCH 2009

XBOX 360

1 – **Call Of Duty: World At War** (Activision)
2 – **Gears Of War 2** (Microsoft)
3 – **Need For Speed: Undercover** (EA)
4 – **FIFA 09** (EA)
5 – **Far Cry 2** (Ubisoft)

PC

1 – **Football Manager 2009** (Sega)
2 – **World Of Warcraft: Wrath Of The Lich King** (Activision)
3 – **Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3** (EA)
4 – **The Sims 2: Double Deluxe** (EA)
5 – **Call Of Duty: World At War** (Activision)

PSP

1 – **FIFA 09** (EA)
2 – **Need For Speed: Undercover** (EA)
3 – **Football Manager Handheld 2009** (Sega)
4 – **Pro Evolution Soccer 2009** (Konami)
5 – **Star Wars: The Force Unleashed** (Activision)

MUSIC

1 – **Poker Face** (Lady Gaga)
2 – **Right Round** (Flo Rida feat. Ke$ha)
3 – **Islands In The Stream** (Jenkins/West/Jones/Gibb)
4 – **Just Can't Get Enough** (The Saturdays)
5 – **Love Story** (Taylor Swift)

THIS MONTH IN...

Official Xbox 360 Magazine

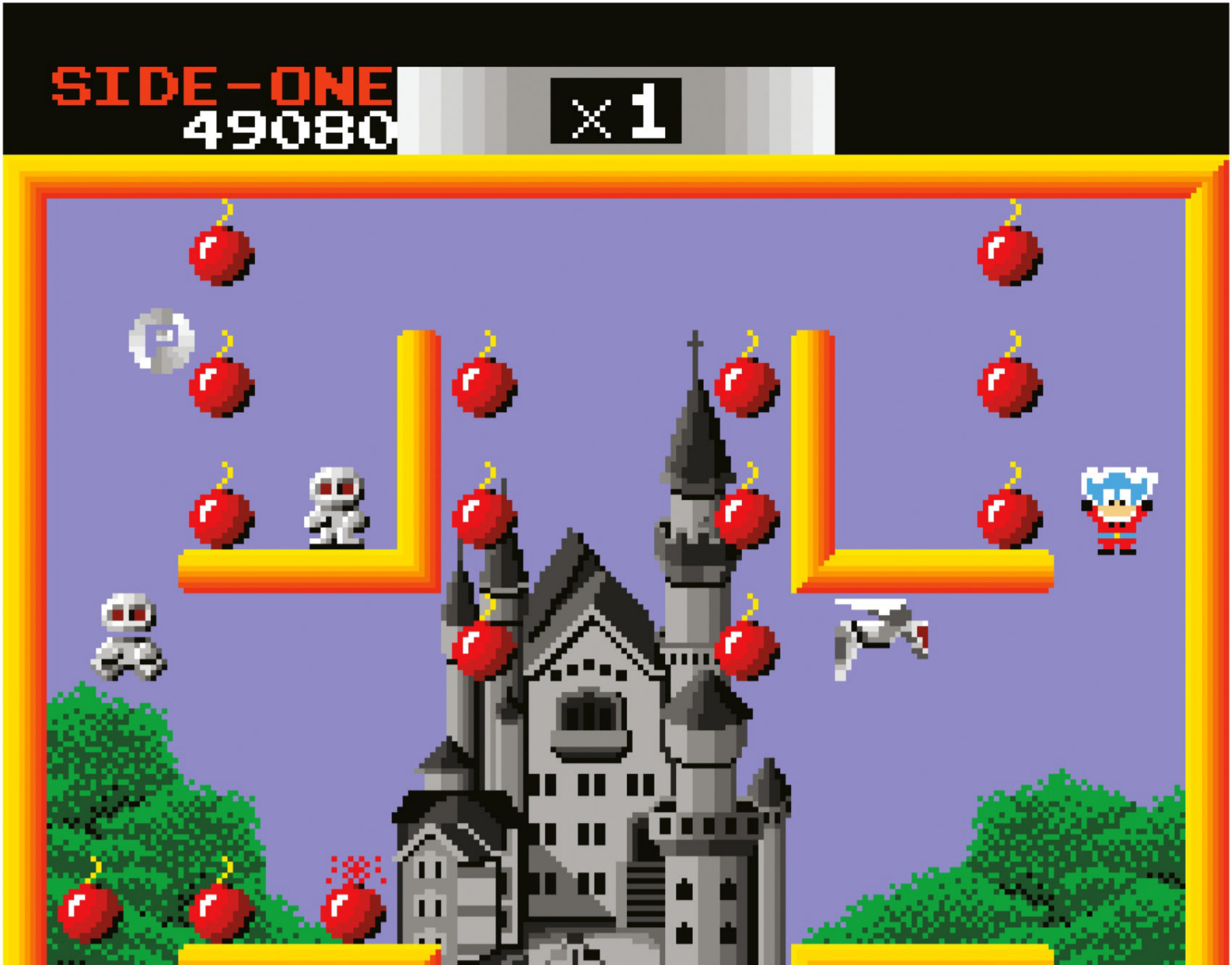
A feature on DLC says some gamers "think that it's a cynical excuse to squeeze even more cash out of consumers who are already blowing 40 quid on a game in between sequels". We wonder where they got that idea?

Official Nintendo Magazine

Nintendo seems to be unstoppable, judging by its sales in 2008 – 20.1 million Wii games and 19.1 million DS games were sold in the UK that year, while the company shifted 10.17 million Wiis and 9.95 million DS units in the US.

PC Gamer

"The AMD Fusion Render Cloud is a supercomputer with over 1,000 graphics processors inside. This 'cloud computing' could provide a platform for weaker PCs to run intensive applications." The cloud? It'll never catch on, surely?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Bomb Jack

I DON'T KNOW JACK

» ARCADE » 1984 » TEHKAN

One of the dangers of decent home conversions is that no matter how good they are, they're not the original arcade game. This realisation struck home recently when I visited Arcade Club in Bury. I've not played *Bomb Jack* many times in an actual arcade, but I used to absolutely rinse it on the Amstrad and Spectrum growing up and became so good at it that I could continually loop the levels and rack up ridiculous high scores.

Needless to say, when I saw it at the back of Arcade Club's top floor I simply assumed it would be easy to top the game's current high score. What an idiot I was. While the Spectrum version in particular is a very good home port, it doesn't come anywhere close to matching the *feel* and nuance of the arcade original. Enemies didn't respond how I expected them to, the fluttering mechanic as Jack drops down from a jump felt off, the scoring system felt different and the overall speed of the game really took me by surprise.

While I did indeed manage to clear most of the levels, the tactics and bomb-collecting paths that were seared into my brain from playing it so much on the 8-bit systems was about as useful as a chocolate teapot and I simply couldn't get near to the high score that had been set. After around 30 minutes I accepted defeat and wandered off to play other games, but that high score kept taunting me and I continued to return over the 11 hours I stayed at the venue, but to no avail.

The misery of my defeat reminded me of another time when my smugness at home playing *Flying Shark* didn't equate to mastering the same game in the arcade and it highlighted to me that unless the home version you have is identical to the arcade original, mastering that will only get you so far on the real deal. Still, at least no one was able to beat my *Strider* and *Shinobi* high scores.

THE EVOLUTION OF SHINOBI

WHEN NINJAS RULED THE POP CULTURE LANDSCAPE, SHINOBI AMAZED ARCADE-GOERS AND BLEW MINDS ON THE MEGA DRIVE. WITH JOE MUSASHI COMING OUT OF RETIREMENT, WE LOOK BACK AT HOW THIS CLASSIC ACTION SERIES HAS CHANGED OVER NEARLY FOUR DECADES

WORDS BY NICK THORPE

If we've learned one thing about ninjas over the years, it's that they're supposed to be stealthy. Whether you look at their historical jobs of spying on enemies and sabotaging them, or their popular depiction as shadowy assassins able to disappear in a puff of smoke, the key thing is that their activities are covert. When you see Joe Musashi in the very first *Shinobi* game, walking through the city streets and slinging shurikens without so much as a mask to protect his identity, you do wonder who trained him.

Then again, perhaps it's no surprise that he ended up that way. After all, modern spies are supposed to act in secret too – if they have to resort to shooting dozens of multicoloured goons, something has obviously gone very wrong. Yet that was exactly what you did in Namco's arcade game *Rolling Thunder*, and Sega borrowed more than a casual disregard for stealth from that game. The design of *Shinobi* was led by Yutaka Sugano, a relatively recent hire who had previously worked on *Alex Kidd: The Lost Stars*, and he adopted a broadly similar run-and-gun style that even aped the way secret agent Albatross would perform giant jumps to upper levels of the play area. However, players were won over in greater numbers by the exploits of the American ninja, Joe Musashi.

"While the spy theme of *Rolling Thunder* is cool, I think ninjas are just cooler," says Kurt Kalata of Hardcore Gaming 101. "This is especially true since it was released in the mid-Eighties, back when they seemed pretty dangerous and before they got cartoonified with stuff like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*." The ninja theme also attracted Mel Taylor, better known on YouTube as Sega Lord X, who first encountered the game at his local arcade Fun N Games. "Anything with ninjas in the Eighties was an immediate attention getter, and I must say I was blown away by the bonus round's visuals." What's so impressive about the very first *Shinobi* game is that it establishes pretty much all of the core thematic elements that would carry through the series. "What really stands out to me is the variety in the setting. It's a modern world with a touch of sci-fi, so you're not just fighting ninjas and soldiers – you're also up against robots and monsters," says Toru Ohara, a Sega staff member who joined the company in 1993. Indeed, you start off fighting regular gunmen and ninjas in an urban environment, but by the end of the game you'll have taken on skeletal warriors, the robotic boss Mandara and more.

> "WHILE THE SPY THEME OF ROLLING THUNDER IS COOL, I THINK NINJAS ARE JUST COOLER"
> KURT KALATA

"On top of that, the main character is a super ninja who can take on all these powerful enemies using a wide range of special techniques," says Ohara. In the first game, Joe Musashi did have his shurikens as well as secondary, close-range weapons that were automatically used when enemies were in range. However, the most ▶

INTERVIEWEES

BEN FIQUET
Lizardcube CEO, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

KURT KALATA
Owner and writer, Hardcore Gaming 101

MEL TAYLOR
Popular Youtuber, better known as Sega Lord X

SACHA SZYMONIAK
Lizardcube producer, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

TEE LOPES
Musician, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

TORU OHARA
Sega producer, *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*

» [Arcade] *Shinobi* was a thoroughly modern ninja experience, rather than sticking to historical depictions.

» [Arcade] A good dose of ninjutsu will do plenty of damage to the bosses, so use it wisely.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

BONUS STAGES

HOW THE STAGES BETWEEN STAGES DEVELOPED WITH TIME

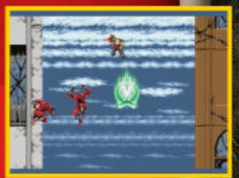
SHINOBI

■ This one's a classic – you take a first-person perspective and start flinging shurikens like your life depends on it, as enemy ninjas run in from the sides of the screen and advance toward you. Fail to take them all out and you'll have one leap right into your face, denying you a coveted extra life.

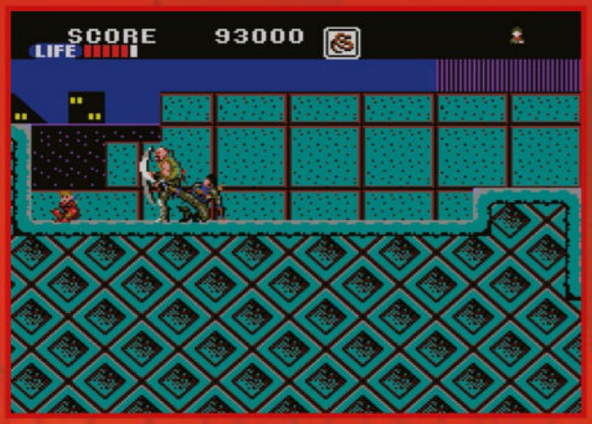
SHADOW DANCER

■ It feels rather like Sega didn't want to change too much here, as mechanically this is very similar to before. You look up a tall building as ninjas emerge from doorways and begin to jump down. Once again, failure results in a big close-up, though we think the original ninja was cooler than big boot boy here.

SHADOW DANCER (MEGA DRIVE)



■ Tall buildings again here, but this time you're the one doing the plummeting, with the goal of taking out enemy ninjas as you fall. The enemies have more obvious formations here, so it doesn't feel quite as chaotic as the previous bonus games do – but it's not as visually exciting, either.



» [Master System] Sega's 8-bit conversion is really the bridging point between the arcade origins and console-style games.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

POWER-UPS

EVERY NINJA NEEDS A GOOD WEAPON NOW AND THEN

SHINOBI (MASTER SYSTEM)

■ Joe Musashi might be a little more leisurely on the Master System, but his arcade counterpart never got to play with nunchaku, did he? These extend the range of your melee attack if you're lucky enough to get some, which is quite nice against these leaping scuba ninjas in the second stage.

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

■ That little POW icon is your best friend in this game, giving you access to flaming shurikens and an upgraded sword attack, which gives off a nice crescent-shaped swoosh when used. They're both very powerful, but you lose them if you take a hit, so try not to do that, won't you?

SHINOBI X

■ Grab the sword upgrade in the Saturn game, and every time you swing it a great big Bishamon apparition will appear behind you, which can damage enemies. It's an odd effect that is quite jarring when first seen, but fits in with Bishamon's role as a god of warriors in Japanese culture.

visually striking moves were the ninjutsu techniques, ninja magic attacks that could be activated in a pinch to clear out a screen full of enemies or do damage to the bosses. In comparison to *Rolling Thunder*, Kurt points out that, "[*Shinobi*] also has a more advanced design, with a larger variety in levels and proper boss fights. *Shinobi* makes a big deal of this with the maps and the boss portraits in the mid-level screens!" Sega's game also required players to rescue kidnapped ninja apprentices throughout each stage, and the first-person bonus stage allowed players to win extra lives between stages.

***Shinobi* was a big success in arcades upon its release in late-1987, particularly in the USA, and the game was inevitably converted to a variety of platforms.** The most important one was Sega's own Master System version, as it kicked off a process of divergent evolution. Though largely faithful in terms of level design, the 8-bit conversion directed by Katsuhiro Hasegawa made a variety of mechanical changes suited to the home market, and also made an important story contribution in creating the evil Zeed organisation. "The original arcade *Shinobi* is always pushing you forward with a tight time limit. That works in arcades, which are rushing you to play through (and die) as fast as possible, but console games don't need to be quite as speedy," says Kurt. "The slower speed of the Master System version was probably more of a result of technical limitations than anything intentional, but that pacing did carry forward to *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. The life bar is also quite welcome, since again, console games didn't need to be quite as brutal as their arcade counterparts." Rescuing hostages was no longer mandatory, though you'd be a fool to pass them up as they held power-ups, and it was much harder to use ninjutsu as you had to win it in bonus stages.

The first sequel to *Shinobi* was an arcade game called *Shadow Dancer*, released in 1989. Since Sugano had relocated to America, the new game was developed by new staff. Hostages were replaced with time bombs that needed to be defused and the unnamed ninja protagonist was now clad in white, but otherwise the game followed the template of its coin-op predecessor very closely – you'd still die from a single hit and had basically the same abilities, save for one big change. This time around, you had a dog. You could send the dog charging towards an enemy by holding down and pressing the attack button, and if it connected while they were vulnerable, the dog would prevent them attacking and leave them open for an attack. If you mistimed the attack though, the dog would take a hit and temporarily shrink into a puppy form.

» [Arcade] *Shadow Dancer* upped the drama when the player pushed the ninjutsu button, with full-screen interludes.

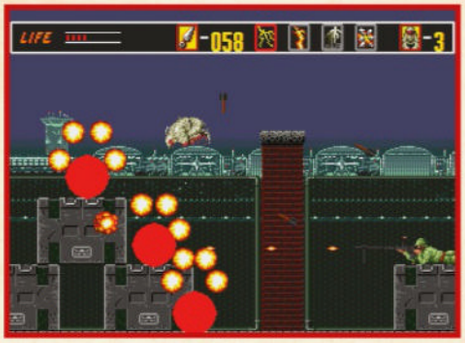
» [Arcade] "Oh, he never normally does this," protests a ninja who has seen his dog do that repeatedly.

While *Shadow Dancer* continued the arcade lineage of the series, a development team headed up by Noriyoshi Ohba was creating *The Revenge Of Shinobi* for the Mega Drive. In a 2003 interview with Sega's Japanese website, translated by shmuplations.com, he explained that due to the differences in play style between the home and arcade market, the new game "needed a gameplay system that would make players feel like they've got their money's worth". Though the Master System version wasn't a reference point, Ohba and his team came to many of the same conclusions – Joe Musashi did need a life bar and access to plenty of pick-ups in his quest to rescue his beloved Naoko from Neo Zeed, but the time limit and hostage rescue mechanic could be scrapped. The changes went further this time, though. If you found the power-up icon in a crate, you were able to guard against enemy shurikens and bullets while walking or crouching. More notably, Joe's high jump was replaced with a somersault double jump. This wasn't just a useful tool to gain extra height in the taller stages – for a start, if you pressed the attack button during the somersault, Joe would fling out a spectacular spread of shuriken, though it wasn't advisable to overuse this move as the supply of projectiles was limited for the first time in the series. More importantly, certain stages incorporated multiple planes of action and the double jump was your means of switching between the two.

> "THE ORIGINAL ARCADE SHINOBI IS ALWAYS PUSHING YOU FORWARD WITH A TIGHT TIME LIMIT"
> KURT KALATA

The Revenge Of Shinobi didn't just make great strides in game design, though – as a high-profile game for the Mega Drive, it needed to show off what Sega's relatively new 16-bit machine could do. Critics lauded the visuals as arcade quality, and the game's memorable soundtrack by Yuzo Koshiro really defined the sound of the series from that point on. "It was one of the soundtracks that introduced me to an array of musical genres that, up until that point, I just wasn't familiar with," says Tee Lopes, musician on *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*. "It was just the kind of stuff that didn't play on the radio, and the mix of then-modern elements in the music with the traditional Japanese elements was just mind-blowing to me, because it was a completely new soundscape that I had never heard before." From the rock stylings of *Like A Wind* to the contemporary dance style of *Ninja Step*, there was plenty of variety in the high-quality compositions that make up one of the console's most memorable soundtracks. The game was a big success and had great longevity because it became a staple of compilation cartridges as the Mega Drive aged. For a short time, the two styles

» [Mega Drive] Rambo, Batman and Godzilla were just a few of the pop culture icons that featured in the first Japanese version of *Revenge*.



» [Mega Drive] Joe has just sprayed soldiers with shurikens while leaping over the fence.

overlapped. *Shadow Dancer* received various conversions, but the Mega Drive game was even more drastically different from its arcade counterpart than the Master System's *Shinobi* conversion had been. Once again, a new team was in charge of the game, with notable names including game designer Tomohiro Kondo, who would go on to produce *Panzer Dragoon*, and artist Rieko Kodama. This version shared the core concepts of its arcade namesake, including the dog-assisted combat and one-hit deaths, but switched the bombs out for hostages once more and replaced the stages with brand-new designs. These only occasionally resembled the originals, and the brand-new burning city and Statue Of Liberty stages were arguably more memorable than anything from the arcade game. The Mega Drive's *Shadow Dancer* was well received upon its release in 1990, though not quite to the same extent as *The Revenge Of Shinobi*, but it proved to be the last game in the arcade-style evolutionary line. Why? "Variety and versatility," says Mel. "There's more to do in the *Revenge*-style design. More choice in how you approach the enemies and level design. I think it was a natural progression from the original arcade intent – bigger stages, more attacks, more magic," he says. "Plus, the average gamer doesn't appreciate being dropped in a single hit."

The world would have to wait for the true successor to *The Revenge Of Shinobi* though, with 8-bit consoles hosting the series in the meantime. *The Cyber Shinobi* for Master System is better forgotten, being a slow game with choppy scrolling and far too many platforms that dropped away under your feet without any warning. Game Gear owners got a much more interesting game in 1991, titled *The GG Shinobi* in Japan and simply *Shinobi* everywhere else. Katsuhiro Hasegawa returned from the Master System *Shinobi* for this one, with Yuzo Koshiro on audio duties once again, and we were treated to another evolutionary branch from the main console-style games. If you're familiar with the *Mega Man* games, the structure will seem familiar – players started with Joe Musashi and could choose to tackle the first four stages in any order, with a new ninja unlocked after completing each one. All of them possessed their own unique weapons and abilities, and when the full quintet was assembled, you could challenge the fifth and final stage which required all of their skills.

> "SHINOBI WAS SUCH A STAPLE OF THE SEGA EXPERIENCE THAT IF ANY GAME DESERVED TO EVOLVE INTO SOMETHING MORE, THAT WAS CERTAINLY IT"
> MEL TAYLOR

A sequel followed right at the end of 1992, and was created in just a few months by a small team. It's actually one of the few *Shinobi* games with much more team continuity, with Masahide Kobayashi, Yuichi Matsuoka and Ryo Kudou returning from the first game as planner, programmer and artist respectively, with Yuzo Koshiro returning on audio alongside frequent collaborator Motohiro Kawashima. The game followed the same format as before, but allowed players to return to completed stages as they now had to find hidden elemental crystals as well as rescuing the multicoloured ninjas. It's another excellent outing and the pair are easily among the best Game Gear games, but sadly, the series never reprised this format. "I feel that Sega really missed a grand opportunity to take *Shinobi* in a bold new direction – if not on the Genesis, then certainly on the Saturn," says Mel, who has often said that he wishes Sega had tried an expanded version of the Game Gear formula on its less portable platforms. "*Shinobi* was such a staple of the Sega experience that if any game deserved to evolve into something more, that was certainly it."

Joe Musashi's return to the Mega Drive was not an easy one. *Shinobi III: Return Of The Ninja Master* was developed by a short-lived Sega subsidiary called Megasoft, under the supervision of *The Revenge Of Shinobi* director Noriyoshi Ohba. The team had been formed in December 1991 when Sega acquired various staff and unfinished projects from the developer Santos, and it designed the game as a direct sequel to *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. *Shinobi III* was originally intended for a late-1992 release and got so far into development that it was sent out for review, only to receive a rather muted critical reception. As a result, Sega took the game back into development for six months and significantly reworked it prior to release in the summer of 1993 – a risky decision, but one justified by the quality of the final product.

"I'm a big fan of *Shinobi III*, especially," says Tee. "That's the point when the movements became really fluid, and the character started running and wall jumping, and all of those crazy acrobatic things." Much like its predecessor, *Shinobi III* pitted Joe Musashi against Neo Zeed, but Joe had significantly picked up the pace since *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. As well as being able to run and jump off walls, Joe could hang from overhead cables and climb across them. New combat moves included a diving kick and a guard stance that could be manually activated, and there were brand-new high-speed sections on horseback and a surfboard to add some variety. Frankly though, the level design was rather varied without them – memorable stages include one that challenged you to work around obstacles as you ascended on a lift, another with a giant mutant

» [Mega Drive] The bridge stage is one of the few concepts shared with the arcade version of *Shadow Dancer*.

» [Mega Drive] This burning city was a totally new stage for *Shadow Dancer* on Sega's home hardware.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

THE CHOPPER

FOR SOME REASON, NINJAS AND HELICOPTERS ARE NATURAL ENEMIES

SHINOBI

■ The second boss of the game, Black Turtle, packs some pretty fearsome missiles. Those are the least of your worries though, as it's also full of deadly yellow ninjas that constantly leap out to attack you. Hit the engine on the front of the vehicle enough times and you'll disable it for good.

SHADOW DANCER (MEGA DRIVE)

■ This one's not a boss, but it definitely makes its presence known. As you ascend the Statue Of Liberty, a chopper will sweep by periodically and shoot up the ground. You'll need to leap over the gunfire to stay alive. You can't defeat it – your only choice is to avoid it until the stage ends.

SHINOBI (PS2)

■ Your first 3D boss encounter is a nod to tradition, and you simply have to get in close, leap up and whack this one with your sword. Enemies will spawn in to attack you as you fight, but this is a relatively easy battle in a very hard game. Just be warned that you haven't seen the last of the chopper.

» [Master System] Playing *The Cyber Shinobi* is like being on social media, you're constantly fighting off the bots.

» [Master System] This enemy looks more like a wrestler than a ninja, to be honest.

» [Game Gear] More ninjas means more abilities, which let you tackle stages in the optimal way.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

LEADING LIGHTS

WHO'S TAKEN THE MOST PROMINENT STARRING ROLES SO FAR?

JOE MUSASHI

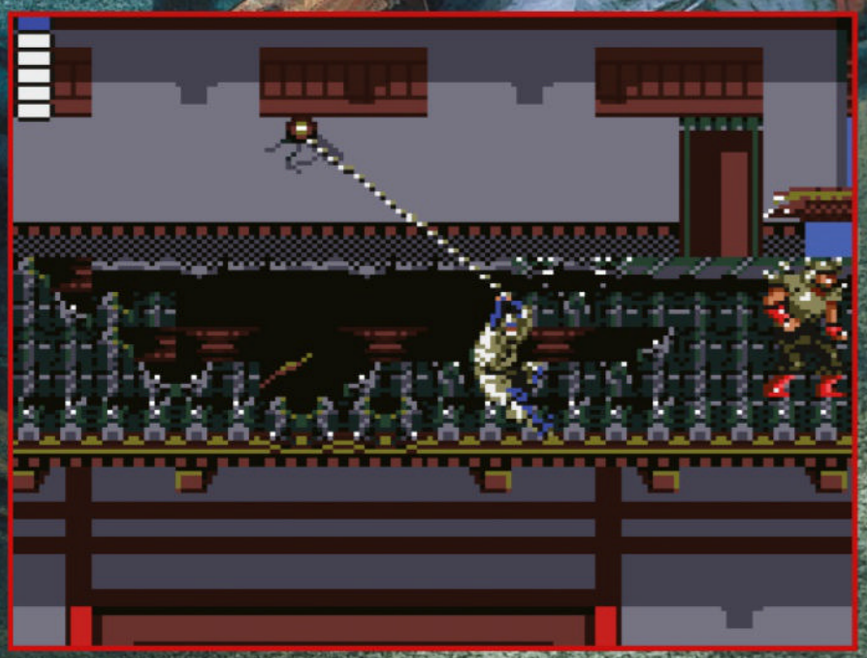
■ By far the most prominent star of the *Shinobi* series, American ninja Joe began as a weak member of the Oboro clan, who gained strength and skill through diligent training. He's often distinguished by his white and red clothing. His games typically involve conflict with the Zeed organisations.

HOTSUMA

■ The star of the PS2 *Shinobi* is a tortured soul – he had to kill his own elder brother in combat to become leader of the Oboro clan, and got the cursed sword Akujiki for his troubles. He fights to rid Tokyo of the sorcerer Hiruko, whose demonic hordes are causing chaos in the city.

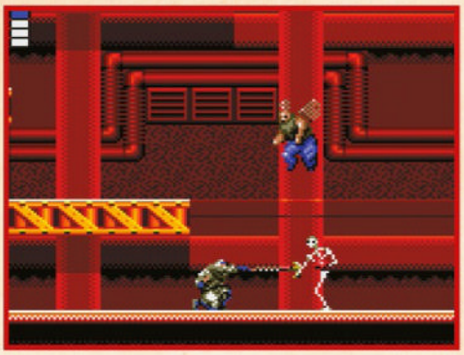
HIBANA

■ *Shinobi*'s first female protagonist doesn't usually show her face this much, nor does she have much love for the Oboro clan – she was given up for adoption and in *Nightshade*, works for the government. Alongside Hotsuma, she appears in the 3DS crossover game *Project X Zone 2*.



» [Game Gear] Only Blue can get over a big gap in the castle roof, thanks to his grappling hook.

» [Game Gear] Yellow can throw a shuriken, which has plenty of range to hit distant enemies.



» [Game Gear] You need a specific ninja to access this area, which hides the crystal you need.

» [Saturn] As well as digitised sprites, *Shinobi X* makes light use of 3D elements.

» [Saturn] The 32-bit game rewards patient players who remember to guard against enemy attacks.

that constantly targeted you from afar, and one set wholly on falling rocks. *Shinobi III* may not have done much that was really new, but everything it did, it did better than almost anything else. "That gameplay had a feel and a flow that few games of the era could compete with," says Mel. "The visuals and audio were just icing on the cake. There were numerous ways to approach and dispatch enemies. It added just enough over *Revenge* to make it the pinnacle of the series."

The pace of technological development in the Nineties meant that the next *Shinobi* was in a tough spot. *Shinobi X* – or *Shinobi Legions*, for our American readers – launched on the Saturn in 1995, and was developed by Tose with Ohba once again supervising. The presentation was radically overhauled, with digitised sprites that gave the game a look that the Mega Drive couldn't have carried off, and one that has proven divisive over the years. The music also moved away from the signature blend of traditional Japanese styles and modern sensibilities that Yuzo Koshiro had established. This was too much for Sega Europe, which had Richard Jacques create a new soundtrack more in keeping with what had become tradition by that point. The story was told with FMV cutscenes, and focussed on the new protagonist Sho and his fellow heirs to the ninja traditions, Aya and the treacherous Kazuma.

Only minor tweaks were made when it came to the traditional gameplay, though. *Shinobi X* played much like the Mega Drive games, though arguably not quite as smoothly as its immediate forebear, but it did have a distinct flavour of its own. Shurikens were strictly limited, so much more emphasis was placed on close-range sword attacks, as well as guarding against enemy attacks. How did Mel feel about this increased focus on melee combat? "I think it was a bold choice, and had they expanded the core gameplay into something resembling the Game Gear games to give fans more to chew on, it may have worked," he says. "In the end, it felt like a retread of what the 16-bit games gave us, and at the time, that was a big mistake. Saturn *Shinobi* was a very decent game, but in the face of the 32-bit onslaught of new ideas and genres, it missed the mark with many fans." After eight years of being one of Sega's most prominent properties, the *Shinobi* series went on an extended hiatus for the first time.

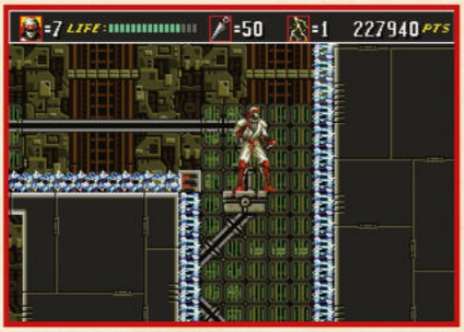
> "I REMEMBER HOW THE TEAM TRIED TO CREATE A NEW CHARACTER INSTEAD OF JOE MUSASHI"
> TORU OHARA

When *Shinobi* returned in 2002, everything had changed – 2D games were firmly out of fashion and Sega was no longer making consoles. The new 3D hack-and-slash game was developed by Overworks, a Sega studio headed by Ohba. "I remember how the team tried to create a new character instead of Joe Musashi," says Ohara, who was working on other games at Overworks at the time. The result was Hotsuma, a new member of the Oboro clan whose dark ninja garb was offset by a flowing scarf. "It was a great experience to watch up close as the creative team tried to express both stylish character design and the visual impact of the red scarf's movement, blending game design and graphics in a unique way," says Ohba. That scarf highlighted the game's smooth graphical performance and added a real sense of style, which was necessary as the game's environments could get a little repetitive.

Still, there was plenty to like about the game. "They captured the modern urban fantasy/Japanese mysticism part very well. But mechanically, it's almost nothing like the older games," says Kurt. "This was pretty standard for 3D games of the era, which often tried to maintain the vibes of their predecessors but did whatever they wanted with 3D gameplay, instead of adapting 2D gameplay to the third dimension." The PS2 *Shinobi* would often box you into areas with a number of enemies that needed to be defeated in order to progress, and this was often achieved with stylish combos that froze enemies in place until their sliced bodies slid apart. "It was very difficult to pull off the combos in *Shinobi* but it was a blast once you got into the groove of it, so it is very old school in design," says Kurt. One aspect of that old school design came from Akujiki, Hotsuma's cursed sword. You needed to kill enemies to keep the sword's thirst for souls sated, essentially meaning that you were working to a time limit. The other aspect was the game's punishing difficulty level, which was extreme even by the standards of a typically tough series.

The team followed up with a sequel called *Nightshade* in 2003, which was also exclusive to the PlayStation 2. This time around the lead was Hibana, a female ninja from the Oboro clan, whose red and white clothing

» [Mega Drive] *Shinobi III*'s surfing and horseback bits aren't complex, but they change the pace nicely.



» [Mega Drive] Watch that path the platform is taking, and you'll know it's about time to jump.

» [PlayStation 2] Arachnophobia is no problem for Hotsuma. Eight legs? That's just more limbs to slice off.

» [PlayStation 2] Hotsuma stands there stoically as his foes die very gruesome deaths.

» [3DS] Jiro Musashi pulls off a somersault jump here, right next to an unfriendly looking robot.

evoked memories of past *Shinobi* games. The game attempted to remedy some of the criticisms of the original, with a guard-breaking kick move added to Hibana's arsenal and no soul-stealing swords to worry about. The game also facilitated far longer combos, but often required you to perform aerial dashes mid-combo in order to reach higher places and cross deadly pits, which could be frustrating if you dropped the combo mid-way through. "I felt *Nightshade* leaned much too heavily on the frustrating deaths, but I still like the overall feel of the gameplay," says Mel. Kurt notes that the games were ultimately overshadowed by *Ninja Gaiden* on the Xbox "which had a much larger budget, grander design, and combat that better gelled with modern sensibilities despite the game also being extremely difficult".

The series again went on hiatus, returning with a 3DS game in 2011 that once again was simply called *Shinobi*. This reboot was developed by the American studio Griptonite Games, and starred Joe Musashi's father Jiro Musashi. The game used 3D visuals but played in 2D, and was primarily inspired by *Shinobi III* – however, new combat moves were once again introduced, most notably a defensive parry. The game was moderately well received, with plenty of criticism of its difficulty level. "*Shinobi* 3D is one of those games designed to evoke old school fun, and for the most part, it succeeds," Mel concurs. "It falls well short of the Genesis titles mainly because the developer cranked up the cheap deaths towards the end, and the combat becomes quite repetitive."

In 2025, the series has returned with *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*. The game has been developed by the French studio Lizardcube, which previously developed *Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap* and *Streets Of Rage 4*, in collaboration with Sega. "I was genuinely surprised to have the chance to work on *Shinobi*, a legendary Sega IP that's been around since before I even joined the company," says Ohara, who is overseeing the project from Sega's side. "I originally planned to share the key points of *Shinobi* – especially *The Revenge Of Shinobi* – but Lizardcube are extremely knowledgeable and have incorporated many elements from past *Shinobi* titles. So instead, I focussed on providing feedback on the game design."

"We tried to look at all the different games that have been made for *Shinobi* and tried to incorporate what we thought would fit the most. And ultimately, the main inspiration would be [*The Revenge Of Shinobi*] and *Shinobi III*," says Lizardcube CEO Ben Fiquet, who has been a fan of the series since the Master System days. *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance* takes place across distinct stages like traditional *Shinobi* games, but they're larger than usual and, like the Game Gear games, have certain areas that can only be accessed with the use of particular abilities. "We wanted to try something new, and we thought it would be more refreshing, less complicated," Ben explains. "But it turns out it was more complicated to make a game that is a platformer, an action game, and kind of a Metroidvania game. So it started simple, but it kind of snowballed."

The visuals look quite unlike anything seen in the series before, with a hand-drawn style that evokes both traditional Japanese art and a French comic style. "I think all the work that I'm doing in animation for videogames, it all sparked from *Aladdin* on the Mega Drive," Ben tells us, which goes a long way to explaining the very smooth animation. "One of my favourite things about having composed for this game was really the opportunity to get kind of crazy," says Tee, discussing the soundtrack. "I was given carte blanche to experiment and to, you know, do pretty much whatever I wanted with the music." Part of that was creating music in unfamiliar styles. "I took it upon myself to go listen to a lot of stuff and study some of the traditions. There's a stage which happens at a Japanese festival, which is a setting I unfortunately haven't had an opportunity to experience in person. But there's a lot of material online that I was able to absorb and draw from, and then use those traditional elements and blend them with electronic stuff."

But the thing that immediately stands out about this latest evolution of the series is the combat – we've been able to string together impressive combos in ways that wouldn't have been possible in past games. "Combat was the main focus, because this is the thing you're going to do the most, especially if you're a ninja and you're fighting enemies, and intuitively we understood that we needed to gratify the player," says Ben. Achieving "the feeling of really playing a ninja and feeling like one" was key for Sacha Szymoniak, producer at Lizardcube. "There are not that many platform action games nowadays that gave me the feeling that our game can actually transmit," he says, before reassuring players that enjoy tackling the environment as much as enemies. "We do have quite a few platform challenges. It's not the core experience of the game, we have put much more focus on combat, but platformer players won't be disappointed."

> "WE TRIED TO LOOK AT ALL THE DIFFERENT GAMES THAT HAVE BEEN MADE FOR SHINOBI AND TRIED TO INCORPORATE WHAT WE THOUGHT WOULD FIT THE MOST"
> **BEN FIQUET**

Having played *Shinobi: Art Of Vengeance*, we're confident that the series is in good hands, and it's fascinating to see that there is still plenty of room for the games to change and evolve. The *Shinobi* series has been rather more stealthy in recent years than Joe Musashi has usually been himself, but we're hoping that it won't retreat into the shadows after this latest revival – it's far too good to stay hidden.

» [PlayStation 2] Aerial combat is a big deal in *Nightshade*, and must be mastered if the game is to be completed.

» [PlayStation 2] This stage in *Nightshade* takes place on the back of a speeding jet. Cool, right?

» [3DS] That's probably just a bit warmer than Jiro would like it to be, we imagine.

» [PlayStation 5] Look at that combo – 124 hits and we're still not finished.

» [PlayStation 5] That red aura shows that Joe's getting ready to pull off an execution or three in *Art Of Vengeance*.

STAGES OF EVOLUTION

NOTABLE SPIN-OFFS

THE SHINOBI GAMES THAT DON'T QUITE FIT INTO THE FAMILY TREE

ALEX KIDD IN SHINOBI WORLD

■ Initially titled *Shinobi Kid* before Sega's erstwhile mascot got the starring role, this 1990 Master System spin-off drew on the stage themes and bosses from the original *Shinobi*, while incorporating the console elements such as power-ups and a life bar. It added a few of its own twists like wall jumps and the ability to launch off of lampposts. It's arguably the best *Alex Kidd* game and a fine *Shinobi* game too.

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

■ Released for the Game Boy Advance in 2002, this disappointing effort only shares a name with the Mega Drive classic. The game was developed by 3d6 Games and featured characters and settings that have no connection to the main series, as well as some rather unappealing pre-rendered sprites. With basic, unexciting gameplay, we advise you to treat this like a katana aimed at your face and avoid it.

SHINOBI 2

■ This oddity is an officially licensed mobile-only game from 2011, which originated in China. Unlike its predecessor, a graphical upgrade of the original *Shinobi*, this game is wholly original and features a brand-new cast of characters. Unfortunately, while it looks rather attractive in still shots and the idea of swapping between elemental swords is interesting, poor controls reduce it to little more than a curio.

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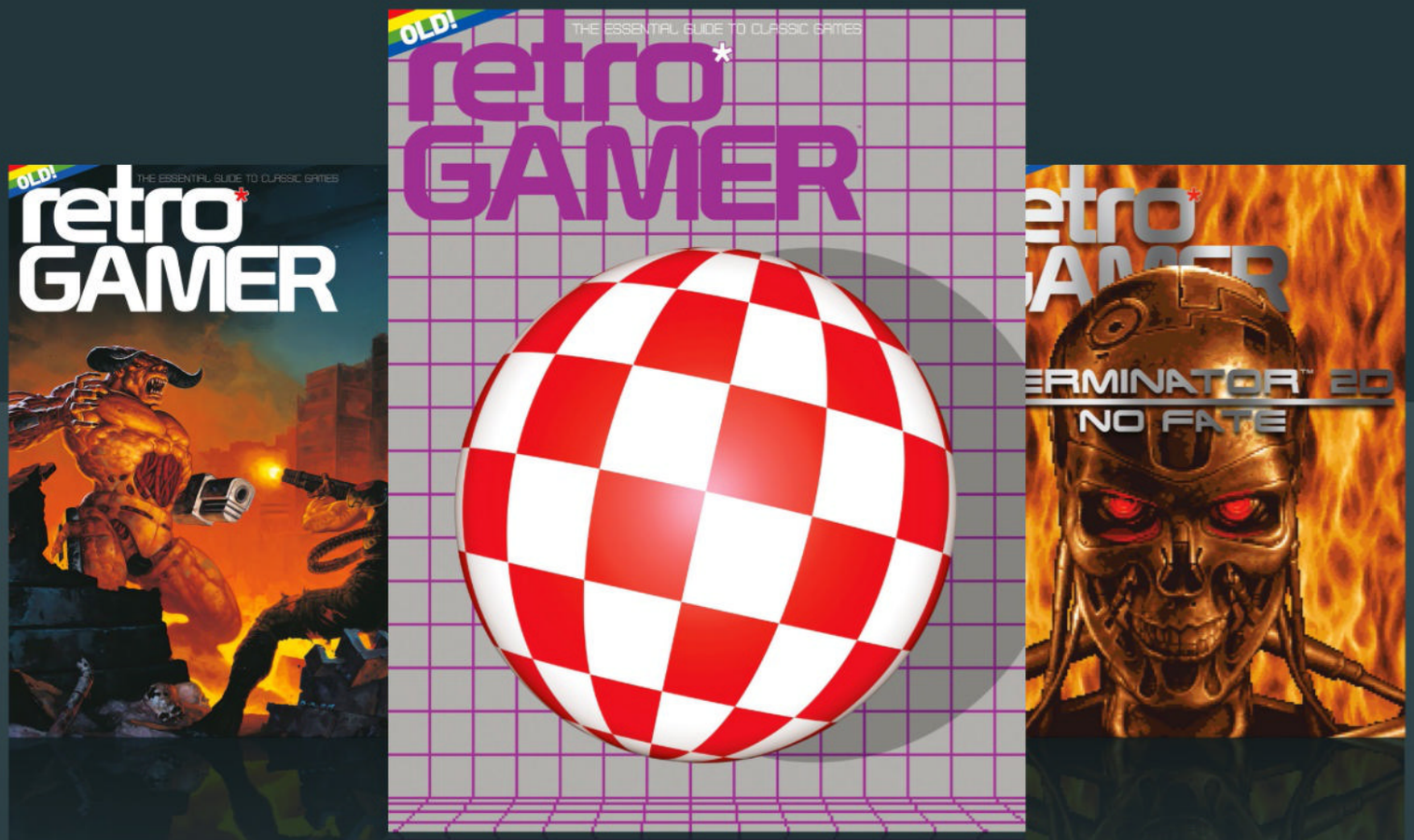

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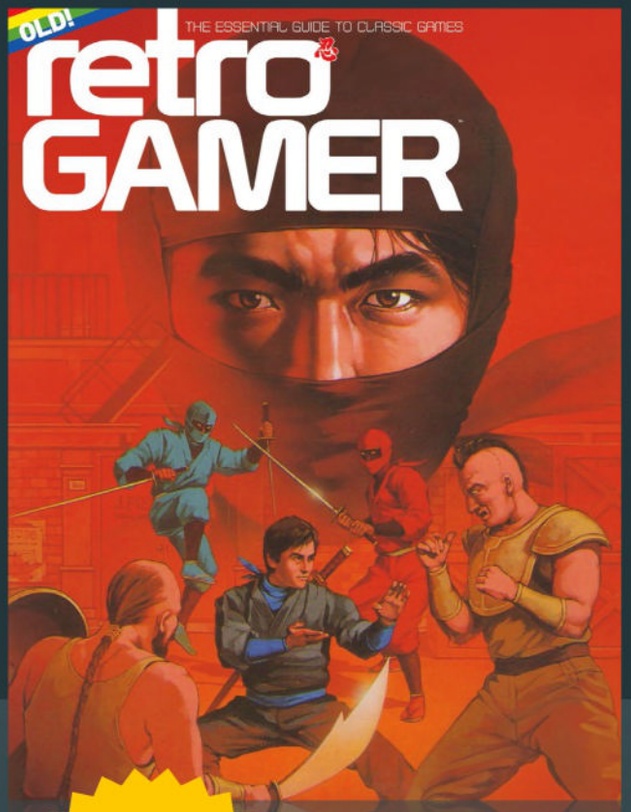

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Microvision

» **MANUFACTURER:** Milton Bradley » **YEAR:** 1979
» **COST:** £45.99 (launch), £80+ (today, boxed), £50+ (today, unboxed)

The Microvision was designed by future Vectrex designer Jay Smith, and it was a truly pioneering device – the first handheld console to utilise interchangeable ROM cartridges. They were pretty unusual cartridges too, as they contained not only the game's code, but also a CPU with integrated memory, an overlay for the console's LCD display and an overlay for its 12-button control panel. A dial positioned at the bottom of the unit provided additional control options. Unfortunately, the first issue of *Computer & Video Games* felt that the Microvision "does not live up to its competitors", owing to the console's small and limited 16x16 display.

With only 12 games released, the Microvision library is small enough that it's feasible to collect the whole thing. However, if you're interested in buying the console today, it's highly advised that you look for one that has been tested and is known to be in working condition, as the system suffers from some common problems. Control panel deterioration is common, but more significantly the LCD displays are prone to leaking and permanently darkening, rendering games unplayable.

Microvision fact

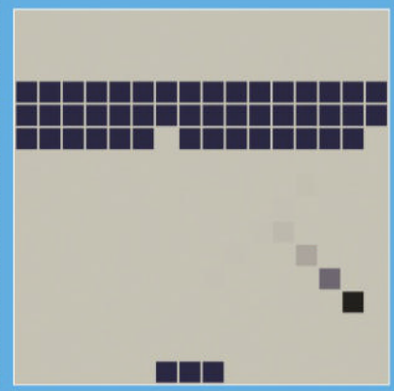
■ The Microvision's display resolution is 25% of the PocketStation's 32x32 LCD screen, 4.17% of a Pokémon Mini's 96x64 screen, and a mere 1.11% of a Game Boy's 160x144 display.

PROCESSOR: N/A
STORAGE: N/A
GRAPHICS: 16X16, MONOCHROME
AUDIO: PIEZO BEEPER
MEMORY: ROM CARTRIDGE (WITH INTEGRATED CPU AND RAM)

ESSENTIAL GAME

Block Buster

As the pack-in game for the Microvision, *Block Buster* is one of the easier games to find for the console. It's easy to see why it was chosen as a player's first experience with the system too, as it demonstrates the kind of game that the hardware is most capable of handling – a simple game in the style of Atari's arcade hit *Breakout*. It's short on unique features, but simply having a game of this kind on a handheld device was very exciting when the Microvision hit the market.



SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

THE MAKING OF NAVY MOVES

DIVING INTO DINAMIC SOFTWARE'S PUNISHINGLY DIFFICULT NAVY MOVES WAS NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART BUT ITS CHALLENGING MIX OF FAST-PACED WATER ACTION, FRENETIC SHOOTING AND A DOLLOP OF DERRING-DO HAS HELPED TO MAKE THIS SPANISH GAME SOMETHING OF A CULT FAVOURITE

WORDS BY DAVID CROOKES

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** DINAMIC SOFTWARE
- **DEVELOPER:** DINAMIC SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
- **RELEASED:** 1988
- **GENRE:** ACTION

If you have ever played more than one game by the Spanish developer Dinamic, you will no doubt begin to notice a common theme. No, they're not all based around a particular mechanic or a certain character. Instead, they're all intensely challenging – frustratingly so at times – and it would appear that's just the way the company wanted it to be. "One of the characteristics of Dinamic games was their difficulty," admits programmer Ignacio Abril. And if you ever want proof of that then you just need to give the first stage of *Navy Moves* a try. Taxing on both the memory and a player's reflexes it could easily take days of hard graft to beat it and progress. "But it was a way of extending the duration of the game," Ignacio says.

Ignacio, who likes to be called by his nickname Nacho, began working on *Navy Moves* during the Summer of 1987. He'd previously written a side-scrolling game for the ZX Spectrum in the style of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* called *Nonamed* which Dinamic agreed to publish. "After finishing *Nonamed*, I got an Amstrad CPC 6128 with a disk drive and it was a massive improvement for programming because of the faster loading times," he says. "When I completed writing *Nonamed* for the CPC, Dinamic asked me to program *Navy Moves*." Nacho jumped at the chance and the deal was that Dinamic would commission the graphics and music. Nacho would write the code.

"I worked for them as a freelancer and my contract was to make the game and get a percentage of the sales," he says.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

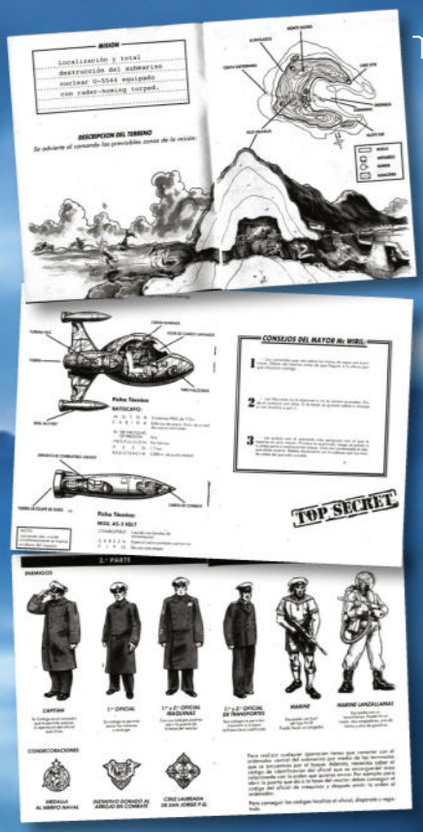
GAME OVER
PLATFORM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1987

FREDDY HARDEST (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1987

AFTER THE WAR
PLATFORM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1989

» [Amstrad CPC] The second part of *Navy Moves* took place inside a submarine and it was familiar platform fare.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Navy Moves* required players to find and obtain codes from officials which could be used via terminals.



» *Navy Moves*' manual included illustrations and diagrams of equipment and machines.

» [Amstrad CPC] The first section of *Navy Moves* was hugely difficult and involved leaping USSEX-12 mines.

"Looking back, it was a very bad way to do it but I was very happy doing what I loved, independent of the money. Really, it was a hobby for me."

Navy Moves was to be the sequel to another Dinamic game called *Army Moves* – a side-scrolling shoot-'em-up spread over two halves in which players would control a jeep and an aircraft to move through the initial stage, avoiding or destroying enemies, before ending the game on foot, reaching enemy headquarters to grab some classified documents.

> "ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF DINAMIC GAMES WAS THEIR DIFFICULTY"
> NACHO ABRIL

Healthy sales for *Army Moves* had motivated Dinamic to want to publish a sequel. "All Dinamic's games sold very well in Spain," Nacho says. But that wasn't the sole reason. "Having a sequel was already in the mind of the people working on *Army Moves*," Nacho adds. "They had some ideas they had left out of *Army Moves* and wanted to put them into a second game."

As such Dinamic decided *Navy Moves* would follow a similar path to the game's predecessor and it initially designed the stages. Nacho then got to work from Dinamic's office, coding on an Amstrad PC 1640 using a PDS Development System. "I programmed on the PC using a cross-compiler and uploaded the compiled code to the Amstrad CPC," he said. "I figured out how to implement the ideas, resolving any technical problems but in the end, I also made a lot of design decisions with the idea that someone from Dinamic would adjust or change them."

The overarching aim was to make a bigger game than *Army Moves*, split, as with the first title, into two halves. This got around the problem of having to fit all of the content into such limited memory and it also allowed for what was, in essence, two games in one.

"The first part of *Navy Moves* was an approach to a submarine, using different stages of horizontal scrolling," Nacho says. It's this nigh-on impossible section that had players in a dinghy trying ever-so hard to skillfully – and with great timing – get past a series of explosives bobbing about in the water. That was before the player also had to contend with enemies on jet-skis firing at them. There was a huge sense of relief and accomplishment when this ordeal was finally over (assuming the player didn't give up).

"The second part of the game was inside the submarine, trying to find a way to place and activate a bomb to explode it, using gameplay based on static screens that changed when the player crossed the screen border (or entered through a door)," Nacho adds. This was an interesting section that involved players seeking and searching officers to gain important computer codes for access to all areas.

BEFORE AND AFTER

NAVY MOVES WAS PART OF A TRILOGY OF MOVES GAMES

ARMY MOVES

The first game in the *Moves* trilogy was released in 1986. In this tricky starter, players would jump behind the wheel of a jeep or chopper and ensure their safe passage by blasting at any enemies that happened to be in the way. They'd then complete the game as a foot soldier.

ARCTIC MOVES

This sequel to *Navy Moves* was originally earmarked for the Atari ST in the early Nineties but financial troubles meant it ended up being released instead for DOS PCs in 1995. The ST version was released in 2001 and this was used as the basis for an enhanced Amiga port in 2017.

CONVERSION CAPERS

AMSTRAD CPC

■ Beautifully presented and colourful, *Navy Moves* made great use of the Amstrad CPC's Mode 0 graphics mode although the mines in the first section could be a little difficult to see at speed. The game required patience and a good memory to get past the first stage.

ZX SPECTRUM

■ Despite having fewer colours, this actually worked in the game's favour – those USSEX-12 mines in the water were easier to spot and that initial stage felt a tad easier (but not by much). Overall, the game looked great and felt faster. The controls were more responsive too.

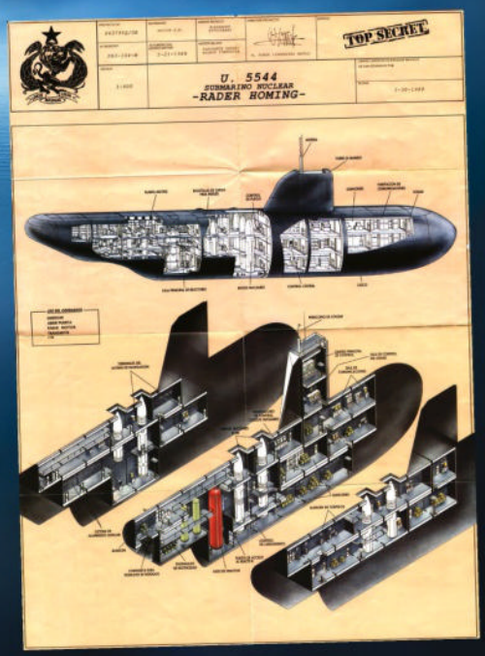
C64

■ The C64 version was programmed by Luis Mariano García Corral using Jorge Azpiri's graphics. It used up to 16 colours and the scrolling was smooth. Sprite animation was excellent too. As expected, the audio effects, while sparse, were better than the Speccy and CPC versions.

MSX

■ With a similar look and feel to the CPC and Spectrum versions (given they were created by the same artist), the MSX port was developed by Carlos Abril, Ignacio Abril's brother. The controls and on-screen movement felt slightly sluggish but it was otherwise a faithful conversion.

» [Amstrad CPC] Once you found a code, you'd type OPEN and then enter it to see what it would do.



▶ Nacho continued working on the game while studying at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (Polytechnic University Of Madrid). "I finished the work from my home, developing *Navy Moves* in my spare time," he says. "I remember doing some annotations for the game during that first year's classes."

> **"AS A GRAPHIC DESIGNER, YOU COULDN'T MAKE ANIMATIONS WITH AS MANY FRAMES AS YOU WANTED"**
> **JORGE AZPIRI**

***Navy Moves* was created using machine code.** "At that time, we mastered Z80 assembly code," Nacho says. "We used the typical tricks of that time, like using XOR a instead of load a, 0 to save some CPU cycles. Of course we kept the multiplications of numbers to a minimum, except if one of the numbers was two to the power of one, to use the shift instructions. And nothing about divisions of numbers, unless the divisor was a power of two number. We also had deep knowledge of the architecture of the Amstrad CPC – about its memory configuration and which parts we could use and how to squeeze the maximum from it."

The same was true of the ZX Spectrum to which *Navy Moves* was also created by Nacho. "I kept a notebook where I wrote down how the memory was used in the game, and which memory address every graphic had. Everything was very tight and changing something sometimes made a readjustment of all the memory addresses. Fortunately it was not very often. I remember a flamethrower fire that was divided into small graphics and then it was composed over time to give the impression of a bigger graphic, so in memory it just occupied very little space."

To keep players busy and to ensure there was plenty happening on the screen, Nacho simulated sprite multiplexing and he needed to pay particular attention to collision detection, more so in fast-paced scenes. The screen was mapped in the memory and only the moving elements needed to be changed. "During scrolling stages, only a little portion of the screen was scrolling and that was just moving the current memory content from one byte to another and then drawing the new part that should appear in the border of the screen," Nacho says. "The choice of the assembly code to do that was important as we needed to save as many CPU cycles as we could to do it fast."

For the stage inside the submarine, Nacho drew the watercraft's parts once the player entered the room and then only drew the moving parts and sprites every frame (when they were really moving). "The collision was done using something similar to collision boxes: just checking the location of the

WHICH VERSIONS OF NAVY MOVES SANK AND SWAM

AMIGA

As expected, given it's a 16-bit computer, the Amiga version of *Navy Moves* was visually stunning and it also had a very catchy title tune. The gameplay was the same, though, and reviewers were not quite as forgiving in terms of the level of difficulty.

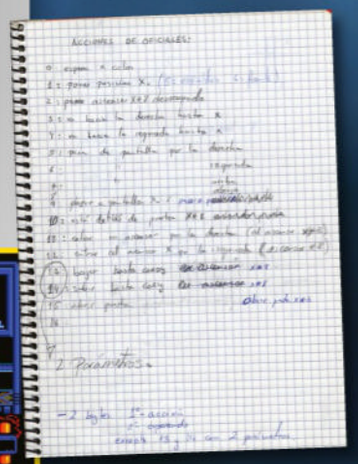
ATARI ST

Pretty much identical to the Amiga version, the Atari ST port had the same detailed sprites and well executed animation but, while it was a visual treat, the in-game audio was just a series of standard effects. Gamers perhaps expected better on the 16-bits.

PC

Time pressure and common sense meant the DOS game placed gamers straight into part two of the game, doing away with those part one elements that frustrated many a player. Aside from poorer audio, it was the most significant change in comparison to the other 16-bit versions.

» Nacho's notebook detailed how the computer's memory was being used in the game.



» Notes show, in Spanish, how the officers moved in the game – they ended up going in circles.

bullets (or mines) with the location of the object (player, enemies…) to see if the bullet was colliding with that object. It was all very hand-made, but that gave us a lot of control over what we were doing."

The graphics for *Navy Moves* were completed by Jorge Azpiri. The nephew of the well-known Spanish comic-book artist Alfonzo Azpiri, Jorge was a very talented young graphic designer/animator. "He made most of the graphics using Deluxe Paint II and we used some scripts to extract the graphics," Nacho tells us. "For the sprites, to know where they were transparent, we used the classical fuchsia/magenta colour (#FF0FF). The routines that drew the sprites on-screen skipped those pixels with magenta, which allowed us to draw a black line around any sprite to get more contrast with the background."

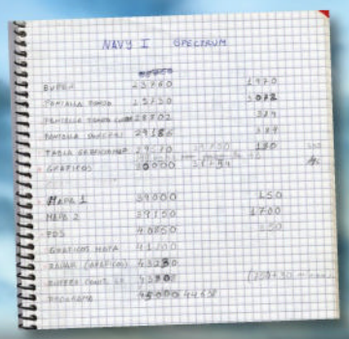
Jorge said he ended up working on *Navy Moves* by chance. "I had been hired to create graphics for Dinamic games, but they were still teaching me how to use the design software, since I came from a background in drawing and paper animation," he explains. "To help me learn, they asked me to touch up the graphics of this videogame, which was already quite far along in development. The result turned out so well that they decided to restart the project with the new graphics."

The work was, he says, quite laborious. "Most of the time you had to figure out how to make four pixels look like a face, or ▶

» [Amstrad CPC] The second part of the game entailed a lot of exploring and shooting.

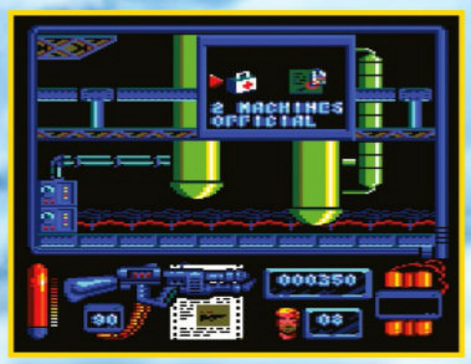
» [Amstrad CPC] With an official located, it was time to shoot and search them for the necessary codes.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Navy Moves* was going to be over three floors per screen but it was redesigned to work over two instead.



» These memory logs helped Nacho's development of the game to progress more smoothly.

» [Amstrad CPC] Life on the open waters wasn't much fun but it was certainly a challenge in *Navy Moves*.



» [Amstrad CPC] Codes would allow you to stop motors, open reactor doors, transmit messages and more.

» [Amstrad CPC] The aim of this part of the game was to set off a bomb at the base of the reactor and scarper.

THE NEXT MOVE

REMAKNG THE GAME FOR THE PC MARKET

Proof that a good game never truly dies, Ignacio 'Nacho' Abril led the development of a PC remake of *Navy Moves*. He joined FX Interactive, a company that rose from the remnants of Dinamic (which went bankrupt in 1992) and Dinamic Multimedia (which shut down in 2001). Both Dinamic Multimedia and FX Interactive were cofounded by Nacho's brother, Carlos Abril, and *Navy Moves* was seen as a good game to dust down and revive.

"We started production of the new game in 1999 when the main graphics card of the time was the Nvidia TNT2," Nacho says. "The game was very good for that time but the responsible people at FX Interactive were afraid of releasing it. They were very well regarded thanks to the past games they'd made in the ZX Spectrum era and they wanted to keep that status. They said gamers were going to judge us by this game."

As time went on, Nacho said the game began to look old. "The new graphics cards appeared (GeForce) where you could start using vertex shaders (and later pixel shaders), but they kept promising that the release of *Navy Moves* was imminent. They wanted to have a different business model for the game, and tried to implement a 'pay-per-play' way, like the arcades: you'd downloaded the game for free and you'd pay for credits in the game. In the end the new *Navy Moves* was never released."

to make it seem like the character was running using just three poses. We were really limited, which made it a challenge and animations were always the hardest part."

Jorge needed a steer from Nacho as well. "As a graphic designer, you couldn't make animations with as many frames as you wanted. You had to agree with the programmer on how many drawings you could use for each animation," he explains. "Similarly, when creating backgrounds, you had to make the smallest possible number of blocks that could be joined together and try to make them not look too repetitive. It was a lot like putting together a puzzle, but one where the pieces had to fit with each other in ways that allowed you to change their placement."

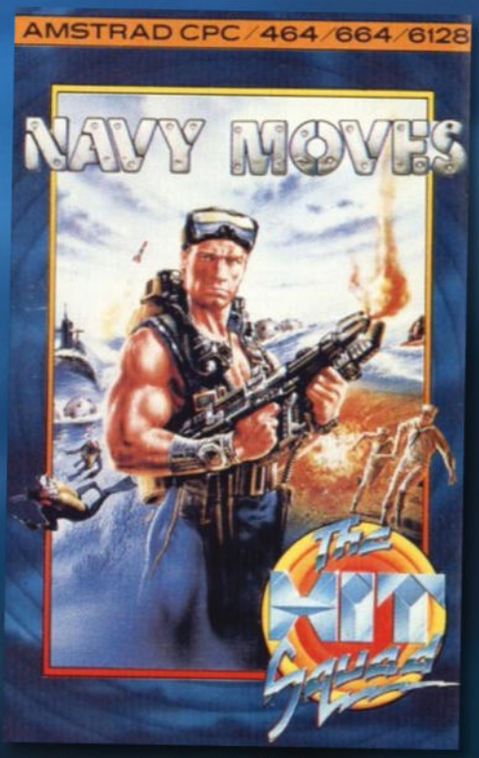
To ensure everything looked good on the screen, Nacho worked hard on various techniques. "Probably the biggest challenges for me were about trying to make things move in a kind of realistic way (not very successfully, I would say). Like for example the movement of the sharks, the moray eel, the octopus or the divers," he says. "In the case of the officers in the submarine, I made a list of commands to control their behaviour, making them move around the submarine, opening and closing doors, using the elevators. They followed those orders every time internally during the game, in contrast to normal enemies' movement that was random and only related to the current screen. You could follow any officer and see they did a circular path."

The original aim was to spread the second part of the game across screens made up of three floors. "But I remember that, after I'd almost finished the interior of the submarine, Dinamic decided to change everything to make the graphics bigger," Nacho continues. "The three floors became two and that meant I had to throw away months of work." It also meant Jorge had to go back to the drawing board.

» [Amstrad CPC] In this water section, you'd also encounter kamikaze commandos that needed to be quickly dispatched.

» [Amstrad CPC] You needed to be on your guard against the deadly flamethrower marines.

» [Amstrad CPC] If you managed to beat the first section, you'd continue your underwater adventure and encounter a sea monster.



» *Navy Moves* was also released in the UK under Ocean's budget label, The Hit Squad.

Still, the game was completed in time for a Christmas release in 1988 for the Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum and there had been plenty of time to make it special with an illustrated manual, poster and a submarine map. There was also a sealed envelope that contained information to help players beat the game. It included a code that allowed buyers to jump straight into the second part of the game if they so wished.

"The game was probably finished weeks before the Christmas holidays and I remember one of the managers of Dinamic telling me about the bad consequences for sales if the company was to miss the holiday sales window," says Nacho. An MSX port was then created. "It was a direct conversion from the ZX Spectrum game," Nacho confirms. Other versions followed.

"Luis Mariano García made the Commodore 64 version and my brother Carlos Abril made the game for the Commodore Amiga," Nacho says. "I did the Atari ST one, still working with the PDS Development System with that machine as the target platform."

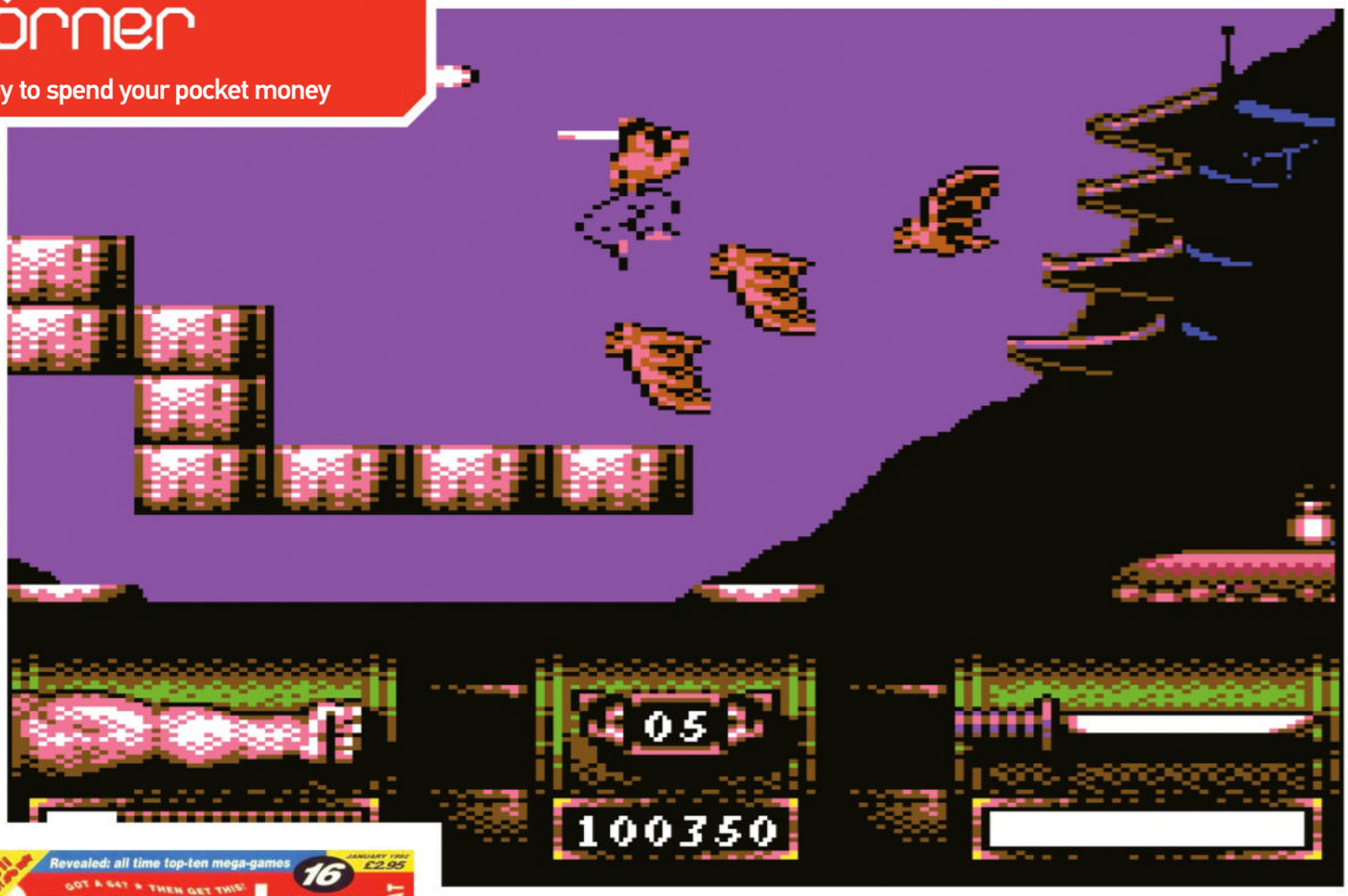
Looking back, the game's difficulty does seem to rankle Nacho even though he didn't really notice during its development. "The problem was that I made decisions about some of the level design and enemy behaviour without taking too much care because I was more focussed on programming," he says. "As I was playing and replaying the game several times a day for testing purposes, I could pass the game with my eyes closed so I wasn't aware of the real difficulty of it."

"WE WENT TO A MAGAZINE TO SHOW THE GAME AND I WAS UNABLE TO PASS THE FIRST STAGE"
NACHO ABRIL

But there were warning signs following development when, after a bit of time had passed, the game did seem to catch him out. "We went to a magazine to show the game and I was unable to pass the first stage," Nacho says. "But there wasn't any time to balance the difficulty, something unthinkable today."

Not that it seemed to have much of a negative effect on the game. Navy Moves ended up being well reviewed by numerous magazines, certainly those covering the 8-bit machines. *CPC Attack!* magazine awarded it 88% and *Crash* praised its overall quality, handing it a score of 83%. The two-part nature of the game – typical of a Dinamic title – was praised as were the graphics. "An excellent piece of software," *Crash* summed up.

"Probably the thing that saved the game was that at that time, there weren't so many games and people bought one and squeezed it to the maximum," Nacho says. "Nowadays, people just leave a game and go for the next one." ✱



» [C64] The atmospheric backgrounds set the tone for the action perfectly.

COMMODORE FORMAT #16

THE 8-BIT ERA WAS FADING AS 1991 CAME TO A CLOSE, AND WITH EVERY CHRISTMAS MORE OF US JUMPED TO THE NEW WORLD OF 16-BIT. BUT ON THE C64, CODERS WERE STILL FINDING NEW WAYS TO IMPROVE, WITH NEW GAMES GETTING BETTER THAN EVER

WORDS BY JAMES KONIK

THIS MONTH IN DECEMBER 1991

Christmas 1991 was an exciting time for gamers. *Sonic* had debuted and the SNES was months away from its UK launch. 8-bit owners still had plenty to keep them happy though, and the January 1992 issue of *Commodore Format* included two tapes, selling almost 70,000 copies. One tape featured outstanding demos of two of the C64's best games, *First Samurai* and *Creatures 2*, and two complete games from Hewson, *Head The Ball* and *Mission Impossibubble*. The second tape featured the Graphic Adventure Creator, an entire game-making package, letting readers create their own worlds.

» [C64] Enemies come from every direction. Fortunately, your sword covers most angles of attack.

THE MAIN EVENT: FIRST SAMURAI

The pull of 16-bit was strong in 1991, but *First Samurai* showed the C64 could still handle the games wowing on their shinier cousins. The C64 version originally targeted the cartridge-based C64GS, and it oozes quality, remaining one of the best examples of what the tape-based system can do.

First Samurai is Vivid Image's tale of a young samurai out for revenge on the Demon King who killed his master. It's a sprawling platformer, with fluid combat and plenty of exploration, as you fight your way through its vast levels. It looks fantastic, with towering Japanese castles, flickering flames and cascading waterfalls framing your lethal swordplay.

You start unarmed, with a moveset of punches and kicks, but killing enemies gives you mystical energy, soon granting you your precious sword. Then you can really go to town on the bad guys.

With your sword arcing above your head and sweeping below your feet you're a leaping frenzy of death, with the single-button controller no barrier to expressive combat. Take too much damage though and your sword is lost, so you need to stay on top of the relentless waves of enemies. You rarely get time to rest. There are puzzles to solve, which mostly involve

» [C64] These flame-belching dragons aren't the only hazards you'll face on your quest.

» [PC] Wizard Mage can help you cross this bridge, but for now you're a couple of logs short.

summoning your guide, Wizard Mage, to get you past obstacles using objects you find, and there are extra weapons like thrown axes and knives. The demo has heights to scale, caves to explore and hidden walls to smash through. It will take you a while to see everything, and delivers a tantalising glimpse of the full game.

First Samurai would go on to score a stonking 96% from Paul Lyons in the next issue of *Commodore Format*, and cement its place as one of the system's classics.

PLAY THIS NEXT: GRAPHIC ADVENTURE CREATOR

Covertapes sometimes included more than just games, and Graphic Adventure Creator was a full game-creation package, letting readers build graphic and text adventures. It took a bit of effort to figure out, but the reward was seeing your game run on your own computer.

From its menus, you can add rooms and descriptions, along with custom verbs and nouns to define how your world works. There's also a simple art package, letting you add images. The biggest restriction is the 23K you need to cram everything into, after what the tool needs.

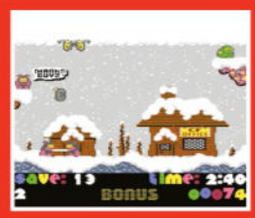
The included demo, *King's Ransom*, hints at what you can achieve. Your creations can be saved to tape or disk as standalone games. ✱

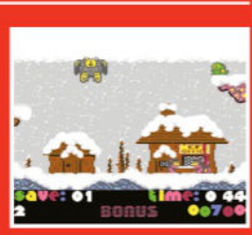
» [C64] Here's everything you need to build your dream adventure.

Covermount HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST OF THE REST

CREATURES 2 DEMO



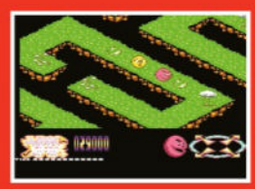


■ This demo for *Creatures 2* is a technical showpiece. It's one of the game's interlude levels, with you controlling a trampoline, trying to bounce your fluffy little friends across the screen. There's a side helping of gore along with the Christmas cheer as your creatures make a bloody splat on the ground if you drop them.

HEAD THE BALL

■ This is an intriguing platformer by Graftgold, with banging intro music. The eponymous head's bounce mechanic makes navigating levels a challenge, but one you can rise to with practice. You've also got a gun, bomb and shield, but with limited ammo you need to think carefully about when to deploy them.

MISSION IMPOSSIBUBBLE



■ In the second of this month's games starring a disembodied head you navigate mazes, made more complex by an intricate network of teleporters and marauding enemies that teleport into the level. Fortunately, you're armed, and can gobble mushrooms to improve your firepower. Make it through each maze, collect the scroll pieces you need, and you'll find your lost girlfriend, who you must then escort out to make it to the next stage. It's cute and clever with an amusing ending and at least one Easter egg.

You find yourself on the bank of a turbulent stream babbling along the base of the mountain itself. It is crossed by a stone bridge leading East to a dark cave entrance.You can also see an old oil lamp
What now?...

» [C64] There's a small demo adventure included with the Graphic Adventure Creator called *King's Ransom*.

ULTIMATE GUIDE
CHAMPIONSHIP SPRINT

IN 1986, JUST FIVE MONTHS AFTER ATARI REBOOTED ITS SPRINT SERIES OF TOP-DOWN RACERS WITH SUPER SPRINT, THE COIN-OP GIANT DECIDED TO RUSH BACK TO THE TRACK. JOIN RETRO GAMER ON THE STARTING GRID AS WE DISCOVER HOW CHAMPIONSHIP SPRINT KEPT THE WHEELS TURNING

WORDS BY MARTYN CARROLL

» [Arcade] Several of the tracks feature handy shortcuts, like this time-saving trip over the grass.

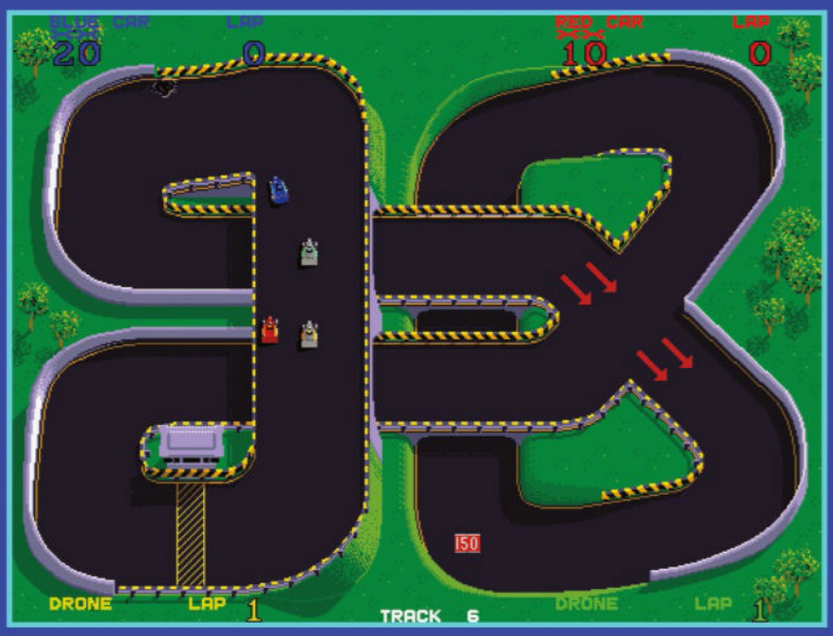
People say that sequels are often a case of diminishing returns. Yet playing *Championship Sprint*, the follow-up to *Super Sprint*, it genuinely seems like things have actually diminished. The first track is exactly the same as the first track from *Super Sprint* – only the grandstands along the start/finish straight have been removed for some reason. Out of the eight tracks, three are carried over from *Super Sprint*, and none of the new ones bring anything new or particularly special to the table. Even the memorable 'jump ramp' element from *Super Sprint*, which admittedly was more Hazzard County than Brands Hatch, is missing. The key difference though is the number of players. *Super Sprint* supports three, which was one of the game's big

"OUT OF THE EIGHT TRACKS, THREE ARE CARRIED OVER FROM SUPER SPRINT"

selling points when it was released, but *Championship Sprint* reduces it to two. So what's going on? Why is the sequel 'less' of a game than its predecessor?

The answer is simple: *Championship Sprint* was designed with arcade operators in mind, not you, dear gamer. Designer Robert Weatherby explained the reason for the game's existence in a video interview included with the 2004 collection *Midway Arcade Treasures 2*. "The major difference between *Championship Sprint* and *Super Sprint* was that it was a two-player game," he said. "It was designed as a kit that would fit into standard upright cabinets." The target upright cabinet in question was not *Super Sprint* but *Paperboy*, the first Atari game to use its System II hardware that powered both *Sprint* games. *Super Sprint* occupied a deluxe cab with three steering wheels, three accelerator pedals – and a large footprint. *Championship Sprint* was presented as a smaller two-player alternative that could be purchased as either a complete system, or as a kit to transform an aging *Paperboy* cab. Internal Atari documents show that 3,595 *Championship Sprint* units were produced, of which 72% were complete systems retailing at $2,795, and 28% were conversion kits retailing at $995. As a comparison, *Super Sprint* was priced at $3,495.

"*Championship Sprint* was more of an update, developed in around three to four months," continued Robert in the same interview. "We chose the three most popular tracks from *Super Sprint* and carried those over, and added five new tracks." If you're wondering how the most popular tracks were determined, it was because *Super Sprint* lets you choose which of the eight tracks you race first, and



» [Arcade] This new track pushes the 2D perspective, using overpasses and underpasses to appear three levels deep.

CONVERSION CAPERS

HOW DID THE HOME VERSIONS LINE UP ON THE PODIUM?

C64

A slight improvement over the C64 version of *Super Sprint*. There are now four cars (three of which are playable – hurrah!), but they are on the small side. The biggest regret is the lack of sound – bar some intro music, most of the action is accompanied by complete silence. The track editor is the saving grace.

AMSTRAD CPC

This nice-looking version suffers from rather pedestrian gameplay, even when you upgrade your car with extra speed. Engine noise is present, but it's pretty grating (think wasp in your ear canal). The track editor element is the best of all three versions, as it's laid out in a way that makes it quick and easy to create courses.

ZX SPECTRUM

Similar to the CPC version, only it looks slightly rougher but plays a little faster. Unlike the other versions, the eight tracks are not all based on those in the arcade game (note the jump ramps). Zero music is present, just the usual droning engine noise. The track editor is fine overall, but a bit fiddly to suss out at first.

DEVELOPER Q&A

DAVID JOLLIFF WAS IN THE DRIVING SEAT OF THE C64 VERSION

» Programmer David Jolliff worked on both *Sprint* games for the Commodore 64.

CAN YOU START BY TELLING US A BIT ABOUT THE GAME'S DEVELOPER, CATALYST CODERS?

Catalyst Coders was a small company based in North End, Portsmouth. It mainly consisted of David Wainwright and a group of teenage coders, artists and sound guys, plus various girlfriends who hung out with us. The atmosphere was very relaxed and almost like a group of friends hanging out together, sharing ideas. There was no nine-to-five time structure. We just appeared and disappeared at will.

WHAT WAS YOUR ROLE ON *CHAMPIONSHIP SPRINT*?

I originally got the job as co-writer on the Commodore 64 version of *Super Sprint*. The project had fallen behind as the coder had left, and David Wainwright and I worked together to try and complete the project on time. I was then the main coder on *Championship Sprint*, but reused some of the routines from *Super Sprint* – sound and music playing, collision detection, for instance. Very rarely did we get any information from the arcade companies. We had to figure it out by playing the game.

WHERE DID THAT IDEA TO INCLUDE A TRACK DESIGNER COME FROM? DID THE PUBLISHER REQUEST IT?

No, the publisher didn't request this. I thought it would be a nice addition considering the limitations of the C64 and there was not a whole lot of difference to the original *Super Sprint*. This did however cause sacrifices to be made, such as lower GFX details. This was to allow all of the different track tiles to match up together without causing absolute transition edges or gaps. The *Super Sprint* tracks were dedicated bitmaps, while *Championship Sprint* tracks were tiles made from individual character definitions to enable seamless connections with other tiles. The system I came up with of using a set of numbers to represent the track layout was for sharing. You could write these numbers down and share them with friends.

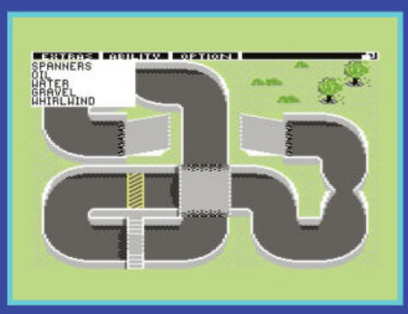
"THE GAME GOT SLATED BY REVIEWERS..."

CHAMPIONSHIP SPRINT INCLUDED SUPPORT FOR THREE PLAYERS – UNLIKE THE ARCADE VERSION. DID IMPLEMENTING THIS CAUSE ANY ISSUES?

In between *Super Sprint* and *Championship Sprint*, I worked on *Rampage* with Michael Archer. Michael came up with a way to toggle the C64's shared joystick port 1 and the keyboard so both could be read at the same time (more or less). This enabled probably the first three-player game on the C64 and was taken forward to *Championship Sprint*.

HOW PLEASED WERE YOU WITH THE FINISHED GAME?

The game got slated by reviewers. I believe this was down to several factors not taken into consideration. Other machines like the Spectrum were forgiven for their limitations as they were very well known. The C64 however was hailed as the all-singing, all-dancing machine. It was not, it just had a few more colours in the palette. The screen resolution was 160x200 pixels and you could only use four colours per character from a set colour pallet of 16. 64KB sounds like a lot but it runs out really quickly when graphics and sound are involved. Each bitmap screen – the title screen for example – uses 8KB. And the processor was not even running at 1MHz! There were a lot of limitations to overcome. In conclusion we were actually very pleased with the outcome.



» [C64] In addition to designing the track layout, you could also place upgrades and obstacles.

» [Arcade] Beware the whirlwind, always ready to throw a (gold) spanner in the works.

during testing Atari was able to monitor those choices. Robert also revealed one of the new features added to the game that actually benefits the player. "We made a minor change to the way you could build up your car. When a car crashes into a fence in *Super Sprint*, a helicopter comes out and drops you off a new one. That whole process just seemed too slow – people wanted to get back in the race. So one of the new features you could add to your car's performance was how fast the chopper comes out [laughs]. You could build that up to a level where you can get a new car very quickly." Another small addition was the opportunity to win bonus upgrade wrenches for beating the best lap time on each track.

***Championship Sprint* – with its two-player cap, five new tracks, 'fast chopper' and bonus wrenches – was released in September 1986.** The game was designed as a smaller, cost-effective alternative to *Super Sprint* rather than an outright replacement, and it was common to see them lined in arcades, side by side, like two Formula 1 teammates; very similar, but with slightly different qualities. There's debate as to whether *Championship Sprint* is more difficult, in that the CPU drone cars are faster, but our tests were inconclusive. If you're way out in front, the rubber-banding on the second-placed drone does appear slightly more pronounced, but that's all. One occurrence both games shared was an

» [Arcade] The new fast chopper upgrade helps you out of sticky situations like this in record time.

> "THE GAME WAS DESIGNED AS A SMALLER, COST-EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE TO THE ORIGINAL"

issue with its free-spinning steering wheels, which were carried forward from Atari's earlier *Sprint* games from the Seventies. The wheels were actually rotary dials which players would spin to take corners, and over time the situation got rather... heated. "People were spinning those wheels so much during gameplay it was causing excessive heat build-up," remembers Robert. "We had a lot of steering wheel shafts heat up and crack. It was a kind of customer service nightmare, shipping out new steering wheels to these guys – for overplay. But that's a good problem."

While Atari was dealing with that issue, over in the UK, Activision was busy bringing the game home. The firm, under its Electric Dreams arm, had already converted *Super Sprint* to home computers, so it was no surprise that it signed up the sequel. Catalyst Coders was handed conversion duties and it produced versions for the Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum. Overall, the versions were just fine, but what elevated them was the inclusion of a custom track designer. Now, if you weren't happy that none of the tracks featured a jump ramp, for example, you could make your own with as many jumps as you could cram onto

» [Arcade] You need to line up this shortcut carefully, otherwise you'll crash and burn on landing.

» [Amstrad CPC] Creating your own tracks was the highlight of Activision's home conversions.

» [Arcade] The best upgrade path is Higher Top Speed first, then Turbo Acceleration, then Super Traction. Forget the Fast Chopper.

MORE TO EXPLORE

ARCADE GAMES THAT FOLLOWED THE SPRINT FORMULA

SUPER OFF ROAD

1989

Almost as a response to Atari's slick circuits, Leland Corp's *Super Off Road* served up rough tracks littered with bumps and jumps. The result was a supremely fun racer that made *Super Sprint* look rather routine. It even nicked its key feature – three-player support.

BADLANDS

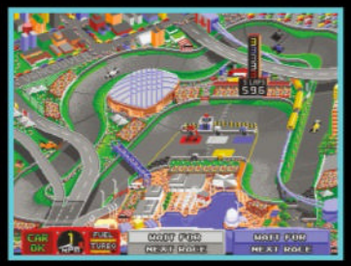
1990

This is what happened when Atari crossed *Super Sprint* with *Mad Max*. It's basically *Sprint* racing in a future wasteland, with the cars now equipped with weapons. The track theming was excellent, so it's a shame the game opted to use a standard low-resolution display.

ROUGH RACER

1990

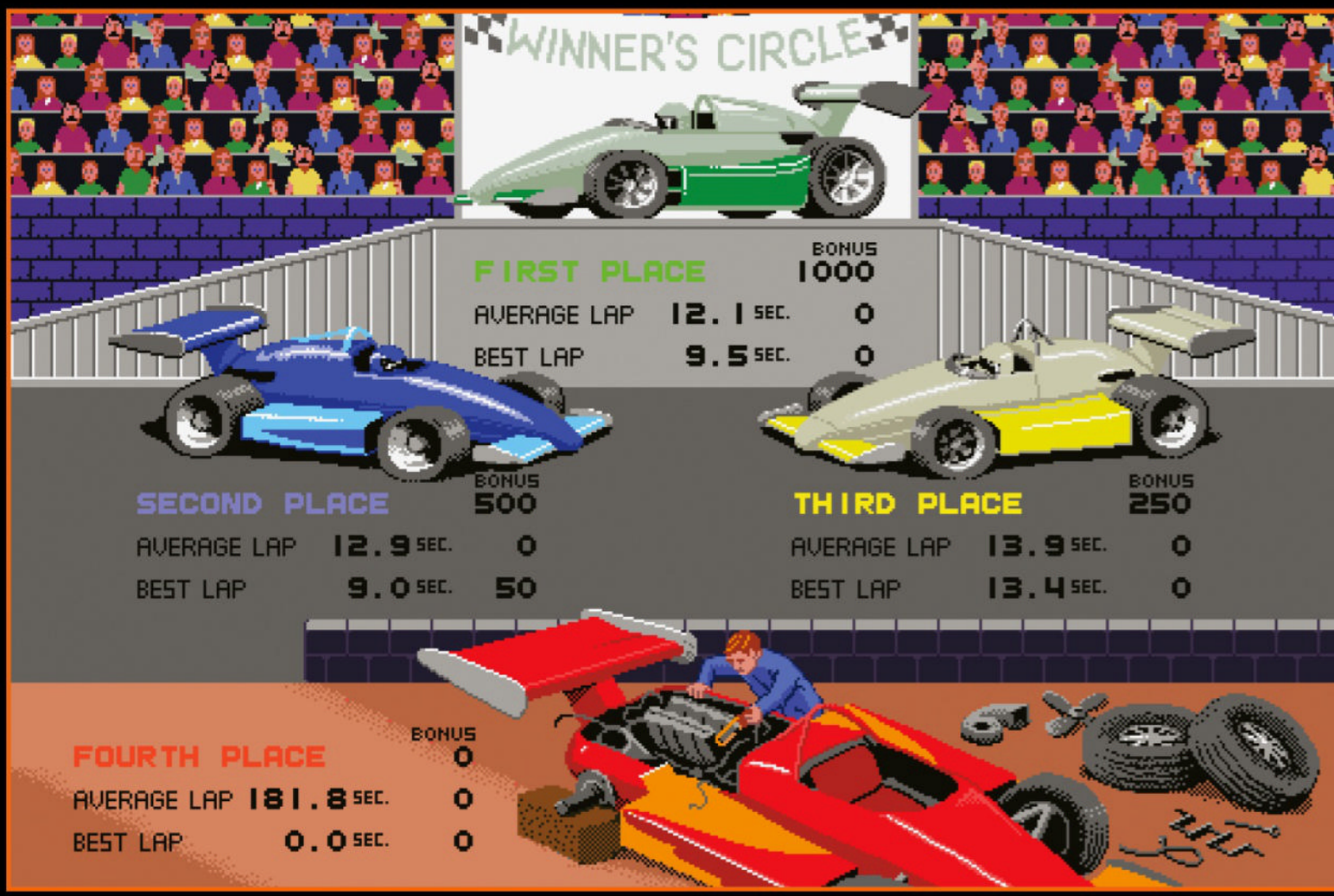
If medium-res racing was more your thing, this System 24 game from Sega was designed just for you. It played like a mash-up of *Super Sprint* and *Wacky Races*, with an emphasis on slapstick. Sadly it was only released in Japan, suggesting the genre's appeal was waning.



INDY HEAT

1991

Leland Corp returned with another single-screen racer (associated with Indy car driver Danny Sullivan) that elevated the formula once again, featuring some beautifully detailed circuits. It was fun with three players, but it was simply too staid to topple *Super Off Road*.



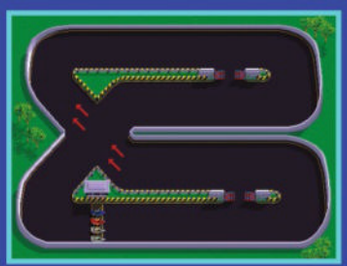
» [Arcade] A little light relief if you finish fourth… your man goes to work on his engine with a hacksaw.

TRACK MASTER

RACING TIPS TO HELP YOU TAKE THE CHEQUERED FLAG

TRACK 1

The sedate opening track returns from *Super Sprint* – a curious decision, but at least the simple layout and wide corners allow players to get accustomed to the controls. This is an 'easy' track, so no bonus wrenches are awarded, but you will find some out on the tarmac.



TRACK 2

A new track, but still straightforward. The crossroads is the only area to apply caution, especially if you meet the back markers on your way around. The two gates do save a little time, but only use them if you're trailing behind, otherwise just go round the long way.

TRACK 3

Your first 'medium' difficulty track is nothing to worry about. Again, the crossroads can be chaotic if not timed right, but the shortcut across the grass that completely cuts out the fourth corner is essential. None of the CPU drones use it, so you can steal a win here.

TRACK 4

Super Sprint players will recognise this as the fifth track from that game, with no changes. The system of shortcut gates is key here, especially if the timing gods play nice and you're able to slip through all three. You can plough straight through the final squiggly section.

» The game was available to operators as either a complete system or a conversion kit for *Paperboy* cabs.

» [ZX Spectrum] The Speccy release features several unique tracks not found in any other version.

the screen. The result was a nice little sandbox which added value to the package – and, to be honest, it was needed. There were a number of *Super Sprint* clones already on the market, many retailing at budget prices like Codemasters' mega-selling *Grand Prix Simulator*, so at full price *Championship Sprint* really did need something to stand out from the field.

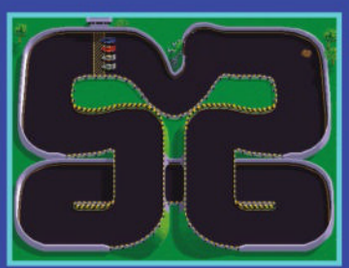
> "WHAT ELEVATED [THE HOME VERSIONS] WAS THE INCLUSION OF A CUSTOM TRACK DESIGNER"

Unlike *Super Sprint*, the game was not converted to 16-bit computers or consoles at the time. Eventually it would appear on various retro collections, beginning with the aforementioned *Midway Arcade Treasures 2*, which was released for PlayStation 2, Xbox and GameCube in 2004. The following year it was included in the PSP collection, *Midway Arcade Treasures: Extended Play*, where you could use wireless link to play local multiplayer games. In 2007 it appeared as a standalone download title on PlayStation 3, care of Digital Eclipse. Looking sharp in 1080p, the version also introduced online support (scoreboards and multiplayer). It was sadly delisted from PSN in 2010, but both *Sprint* games would be collected in *Midway Arcade Origins*, a 2012 physical and digital release for PS3 and Xbox 360. Later in 2016, both games popped up in the *Lego Dimensions* DLC pack, *Midway Arcade*.

For years *Championship Sprint* remained the final iteration of Atari's *Sprint* series (discounting 1990's *Badlands*, which presented a post-apocalyptic spin on the formula). Then in 2023, a rejuvenated Atari resurrected the series with *NeoSprint*, released initially on the new VCS console before receiving a wide release last year (see our review in **RG**263).

Developed by Headless Chicken Games, the new title offers eight-player support, multiple gameplay modes, and – hat tip to the home versions of *Championship Sprint* – a custom track designer. Crucially, the gameplay remains reassuringly *Sprint*-like, and you can fix the viewpoint for that faithful single-screen racing experience. But let's be honest: no matter how well the controls are adapted to home systems, they'll never be a substitute for the original arcade steering wheel… going into a corner at full speed and whipping that wheel around… then catching it at the perfect moment to race on down the straight.

» [PlayStation 5] In 2023, Atari returned to the world of *Sprint* with the well-received *NeoSprint*.

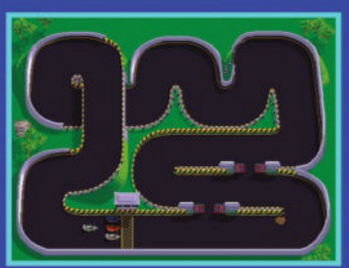


TRACK 5

The third and final track to be carried over from *Super Sprint*, and the first you'll encounter with an underpass (line up straight so you don't hit the sides while your car disappears from view). Note the shortcut just before the start/finish line which omits the chicane.

TRACK 6

This course features underpasses, overpasses and crossroads, making it a challenge for even seasoned sprinters. Its knotty nature means there are few opportunities for easy overtaking – the main overpass is the obvious one. Avoid overtaking moves in the underpasses.



TRACK 7

The first of the two 'very hard' courses, which are characterised by their twists and turns plus the narrow track width (there's not even room for all four cars to line up at the start). The gates should be used when available, and note the shortcut on the top right.

TRACK 8

The final track is certainly a challenge. It's narrow throughout and throws in crossroads for extra fun. There are no shortcuts either, as the gate just before the start line is hardly advantageous. Ideally you need to be in front at the first corner and lead the race to win.

DAYTONA USA

» **PLATFORM:** SATURN » **RELEASED:** 1995 » **CHEAT TYPE:** HIDDEN CHARACTER » **CHEAT COMPLEXITY:** LOW

The Saturn conversion of *Daytona USA* has taken some stick over the years, and with very noticeable pop-up and a somewhat low framerate, it's not hard to see why. However, anyone who is able to get over the graphical roughness will find that the arcade gameplay has come through intact, and it feels especially good with the Saturn's steering wheel. What's more, this home version offers something that its coin-op counterpart doesn't – the ability to take control of a horse and race it against the standard stock cars. The automatic horse is brown, while the manual one is grey.

Your path to equine excitement is simple to explain – all you have to do is finish first in all three races in Saturn mode. That may sound hard to pull off, but don't fret if you're not exactly Dale Earnhardt Jr because a secondary method was also included. On the title screen, hold **up** and **left** on the d-pad, plus the **A**, **B**, **X** and **Z** buttons, and press **Start**. Start up Saturn mode and gallop to your heart's content.

MORE CHEATS TO TRY OUT

SING ALONG

Hold **up** on the d-pad while selecting a track in Arcade mode, and you'll be treated to a special Karaoke mode, which provides lyrics in the bottom-left corner of the screen. Of course, you do sacrifice Takenobu Mitsuyoshi's golden vocals if you do this.

MIRROR MODE

Hold **Start** while selecting your track in Saturn mode, and you'll be able to race it in Mirror mode. If you hold **Start** while selecting your transmission in any mode, you'll be able to race in Time Attack mode, and that also works in the arcade version.

REEL FUN

The Saturn game carries over plenty of the arcade original's secrets too. On the Beginner course, press **Start** in the arcade version or **X** on the Saturn version to stop the slot reels. Lining up 7s, bars or cherries will win you some precious extra time.

RUBBISH RACER

Turn around at the starting line of the Advanced course, follow the road to the right uphill and into a tunnel, and a poster congratulates you on losing all of your sponsors. If you're the kind of racer that gets hopelessly lost like Darran, you may come across this naturally.

MCWILD MOVES

On the Expert course, stop in front of the statue of Jeffry from *Virtua Fighter* and repeatedly tap **Start** on the arcade cabinet or **X** in the Saturn game. The statue of the bruising brawler will start to rotate and even change poses. Pointless, but fun.

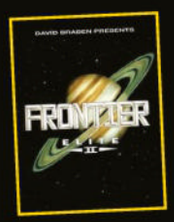
JAUNTY JINGLES

Both the arcade and Saturn versions will reward you with snippets of classic Sega tunes for entering certain initials on the high-score screen. A.B will give you *After Burner*, ORS triggers *OutRunners*, T.B plays *Thunder Blade*, and there are loads more to find.

THE MAKING OF FRONTIER ELITE II

THE SEQUEL TO ELITE WAS ANOTHER GIANT LEAP FOR GAMING-KIND, INTRODUCING PROCEDURALLY GENERATED STAR SYSTEMS AND AN ACCURATE RECREATION OF OUR SOLAR SYSTEM. JOIN US AS WE LAUNCH INTO HYPERSPACE WITH DAVID BRABEN TO EXPLORE THE COSMOS OF FRONTIER: ELITE II

WORDS BY GRAHAM PEMBREY



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** DAVID BRABEN
- **DEVELOPER:** KONAMI AND GAMETEK
- **PLATFORM:** AMIGA, ATARI ST, PC
- **RELEASED:** 1993
- **GENRE:** SPACE SIMULATION

How do you possibly follow up a game like *Elite*? The 1984 space trading adventure was not only a best-seller, but broke boundaries in the history of gaming too. It pioneered the concept of open-ended gameplay within an expansive 3D world, and inspired countless space simulators that followed. In the aftermath of such a milestone, you might have forgiven David Braben, who made *Elite* with his fellow Cambridge graduate Ian Bell, for taking some time off to enjoy his success. Of course, David had other plans.

"After *Elite*, there were things I was keen to do to improve the graphics. I knew I could improve them, even on the 8-bit machines," David tells us. "Immediately after finishing *Elite*, I wrote a faster renderer, still line-drawn, but one that could do many more lines on each ship at a greater speed, using some different techniques. I wanted the sequel to be much more detailed, not just in the ships, but also the locations." Launching that sequel would ultimately happen nine years after the first game. It would also be a pursuit David would undertake without his former programming partner. "Ian was less keen on embarking on a sequel, so I decided to go it alone," he explains.

Work on the sequel began on the same 8-bit hardware used for *Elite*. The advantages of switching to a newer development platform soon became clear though. "I started on the BBC Micro but quickly moved to the Amiga, writing in native 68000 assembler," says David. Remarkably, he coded almost the entirety of the game himself in assembly language, resulting in around a quarter-of-a-million lines of code. "Writing on the BBC Micro would have meant easy porting to the 6502-based machines like the C64, NES, and Apple II, but even by then in 1985, the 8-bit machines were being superseded by their 16-bit replacements," David reasons. He points out that by going 16-bit, "I could do so much more. I wanted to set it in a model of our own galaxy, and make it feel as real a rendition of the far future as I could, so I dropped the early 8-bit *Elite II* work, and moved wholly to 16-bit."

Moving development work to the Amiga enabled *Frontier: Elite II* to soar higher than its predecessor in a multitude of ways. Among these advances was an even vaster

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

ELITE (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: BBC MICRO, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 1984

ZARCH
PLATFORM: ARCHIMEDES
RELEASED: 1987

ELITE DANGEROUS
PLATFORM: PC, VARIOUS
RELEASED: 2014

David Braben is the founder and president of Frontier Developments. He cofounded the Raspberry Pi Foundation and has an OBE for services to the games industry.

» [Amiga] With 100 billion planets to explore, *Frontier* gave players plenty of space to roam.

» [Amiga] Autopilot makes landing at space stations so much easier than it was in *Elite*.

» [Amiga] Turning your engines off and pivoting can help with dodging enemy fire.

» [Amiga] The impressive intro involves a chase sequence, plus dogfighting and a rousing soundtrack by Dave Lowe.

universe for players to explore, with more fully formed star systems. As Guinness World Records states, "*Elite* was the first game to feature a procedurally generated world, while *Frontier: Elite II* was the first game to feature procedurally generated star systems." Looking back on how he first approached procedural generation for *Elite*, David remembers, "After playing around with fancy compression systems it struck me that by applying the right code, they could be generated randomly, but with heavy constraints."

> "I WANTED THE SEQUEL TO BE MUCH MORE DETAILED, NOT JUST IN THE SHIPS, BUT ALSO THE LOCATIONS" DAVID BRABEN

David tells us the Tuscan mathematician Fibonacci was an inspiration. Fibonacci devised a sequence in which you add the previous two numbers to make the next one. "If you look at the bottom digits of such a sequence, once the numbers are big they appear random, but as long as you start with the same pair of numbers, then they are always the same," David explains, adding that *Elite* followed a similar principle. "Planet names, locations, economies; everything is made up 'randomly', and yet if you start the sequence off with the same numbers, then the galaxy will be generated the same way. I remember creating many galaxies, until I was happy with the end result. This was to avoid rude-sounding system names, and also large gaps in the galaxy of stars that would interfere too much with the players' travel, or galaxies that appeared a bit lop-sided."

So how did *Frontier* advance on that procedural generation formula? "It used a similar approach, but used much stricter rules based on empirical observation of planet formation," outlines David. "Every time it interrogates the galaxy 'database' it regenerates the data it needs rather than storing it. There is a big list of real-life data (like Earth, and the stars in the night sky) and the system fills in the rest." All of those efforts paid off in a strikingly detailed simulation. As the website of David's company Frontier Developments highlights in its background notes about the game, "Planets orbit and rotate correctly, so if you stay in one spot you will see sunrises, and the progression of stars, planets and moons through the night sky. It is possible to watch Saturn rise from one of its moons." As a player, you are free to approach this universe in a variety of ways. You might want to become ▶

BUG HUNT

DISCOVERING FUN QUIRKS IN THE LAUNCH RELEASE

Observant players discovered some curious, mostly harmless bugs in the launch version of *Frontier: Elite II*. The most famous of these, now known online as the wormhole bug, allowed you to overcome the normal limits for hyperspace jumps and travel vast distances across space if you targeted certain distant systems, including those between 655.36 and 670.36 light years away. Another example was the bribery bug. After committing a crime, attempting to bribe the police would see your fine become increasingly expensive. By then simply pleading innocence and responding "I didn't do it", the fine would suddenly reduce to just 500 credits. One more serious bug could crash the game if certain mining equipment was left behind at a base before a hyperspace jump.

These issues were fixed in later copies of the base game, and they were ironed out of the Amiga CD32 and PC conversions. Some enthusiasts have actually argued that the wormhole bug was a good thing, as it aided quick exploration of distant star systems that might otherwise have been inaccessible. In the next stage of the series, the sequel *Frontier: First Encounters* would come with some more severe bugs on its initial launch, requiring extensive patching.

» [Amiga] Some players argue the wormhole bug enhanced the experience.

» [Amiga] The flexibility of the adjustable external camera was impressive on the Amiga.

» [Amiga] Our own solar system is accurately recreated, with some futuristic cities added.

a space pirate, trader, assassin, courier, or high-ranking military officer. Whatever your path, combat is inevitable, particularly once you venture into more dangerous star systems. Battles revolve around high-stakes dogfights, demanding a challenging mix of firing laser beams, locking-on with missiles and performing aerial acrobatics to avoid being obliterated.

Despite this open-ended gameplay and lack of linear plot, David was keen to work interplanetary politics and touches of worldbuilding into the game. Your starting character is the grandson of Commander Jameson, the player character from *Elite*. Depending on your choices, you might run missions for the Federation or its rival the Empire, or straddle both sides if you feel brave and want to follow tougher routes to promotion. Browsing bulletin boards for jobs reveals details about missing people, bitter feuds and underworld dealings, all adding a touch of human drama to the fold. Added to these narrative flourishes, within the game box there was a physical 82-page novella called *Stories Of Life On The Frontier*, containing a series of interlinked short stories set within the game world. The box also contained a travel guide booklet detailing the history of selected planets. "I wanted the player to feel a small and relatively insignificant part of a giant galaxy, simply trying to make their way," David notes as he looks back on these efforts to build a sense of immersion. "That felt more real to me than every player being the superhero. I liked the idea of a galaxy that was largely dysfunctional but somehow blunders along, not unlike our own world today."

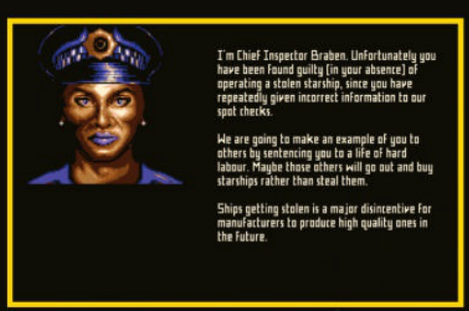
Adding further atmosphere to these escapades is a grand soundtrack by prolific game music composer Dave Lowe. Two original pieces of music are included, but the soundtrack is mostly made up of MIDI renditions of instantly recognisable classical music, such as Wagner's *Ride Of The Valkyries*. What motivated the decision to use these historic compositions? "I didn't want something that would immediately date, hence the choice of classical music, but I also wanted it to evoke the feeling of epic grandeur," David replies.

> "I LIKED THE IDEA OF A GALAXY THAT WAS LARGELY DYSFUNCTIONAL BUT SOMEHOW BLUNDERS ALONG"
> DAVID BRABEN

Lowe's catchy, self-composed title theme fits perfectly in the intro sequence to the game, in which you follow a ship being pursued across star systems by two attacking ships, leading to an intense finale. Game designer Peter J M Irvin is credited with helping to build the introduction, and for providing additional programming for the wider game along with developing 3D shapes. What is really noticeable however, looking at the credits of the game, is that there were so few people involved in making such a huge experience. Most of those credited are recorded as helping David with graphics, play testing, documentation and even just 'moral support'. Another aspect of the game that surprises is how it fit onto a single Amiga disk, although when you reason that much of the experience is procedurally generated rather than based on pre-stored assets, this makes a lot more sense.

Anticipation was high when *Frontier* reached shop shelves in October 1993. Publishing duties were handled by GameTek and Konami. It had been nine years since *Elite*, and gamers and critics were keen to find out whether David had struck gameplay gold again. The overwhelming feedback from magazines was that he had, with some particularly high scores from *CU Amiga* (97%), *Computer & Video Games* (96%) and *The One Amiga* (96%).

Amiga Format came in not far behind at 90%, advising readers that, "If you find yourself getting hooked then you have a game that will last and last. There will always be another world to see, another few credits to earn and another spaceship to fight it out with." A more critical view came from *Amiga Power*, who gave the game 65% for earlier Amiga models and a separate 75% score for how it ran on the more advanced Amiga 1200. Their review argued that, "Yes, these might be


I'm Chief Inspector Braben. Unfortunately you have been found guilty (in your absence) of operating a stolen starship, since you have repeatedly given incorrect information to our spot checks.
We are going to make an example of you to others by sentencing you to a life of hard labour. Maybe those others will go out and buy starships rather than steal them.
Ships getting stolen is a major disincentive for manufacturers to produce high quality ones in the future.

» [Amiga] Inspector Braben will come knocking if you fail the copy protection tests.

IMPROVING ON ELITE

SIX WAYS THE SEQUEL OUTRANKED THE ORIGINAL

MORE SPACE

■ Publisher GameTek promoted there being 100 billion planets to explore in *Frontier*. This compared with 2,048 planets in the original *Elite*. Exploration in the original was also less varied, with just a single planet and star to find in each system.

TIME CONTROL

■ In a rush? Fear not, as *Frontier* enables you to fast forward time, up to 10,000 times the standard rate. Combined with autopilot, it takes the strain out of travelling between star systems and makes the game accessible for beginners.

SUPERIOR GRAPHICS

Frontier was a step up in graphics from the simple wireframe vector shapes of *Elite*. The 3D graphics engine allowed for curved polygons, and dynamically adjusted shades of colours to fit different scenes, both of which were trailblazing features.

REALISTIC PHYSICS

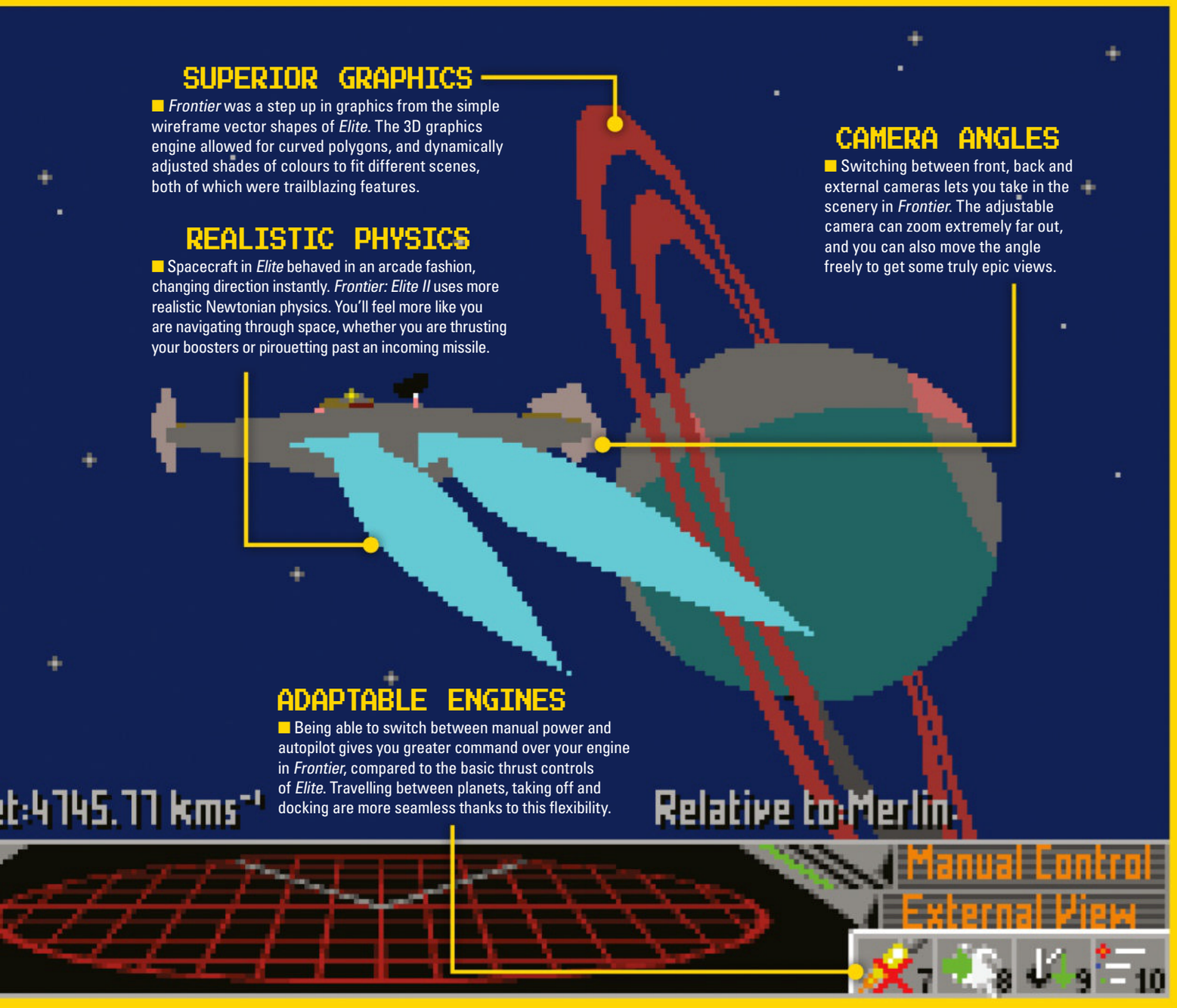
Spacecraft in *Elite* behaved in an arcade fashion, changing direction instantly. *Frontier: Elite II* uses more realistic Newtonian physics. You'll feel more like you are navigating through space, whether you are thrusting your boosters or pirouetting past an incoming missile.

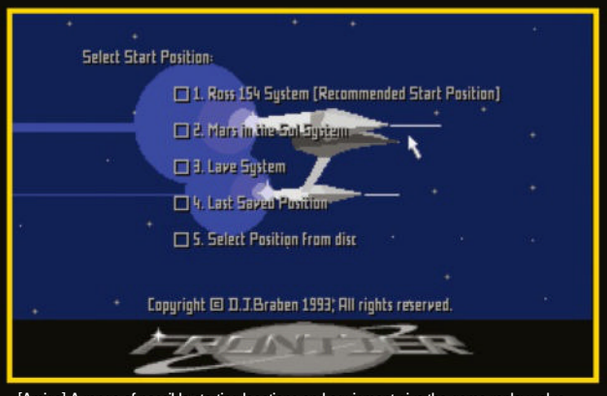
CAMERA ANGLES

Switching between front, back and external cameras lets you take in the scenery in *Frontier*. The adjustable camera can zoom extremely far out, and you can also move the angle freely to get some truly epic views.

ADAPTABLE ENGINES

Being able to switch between manual power and autopilot gives you greater command over your engine in *Frontier*, compared to the basic thrust controls of *Elite*. Travelling between planets, taking off and docking are more seamless thanks to this flexibility.




Select Start Position:
1. Ross 154 System [Recommended Start Position]
2. Mars in the Sol System
3. Lave System
4. Last Saved Position
5. Select Position From disc
Copyright © D.J.Braben 1993; All rights reserved.
FRONTIER

» [Amiga] A range of possible starting locations and equipment give the game replay value.

» [Amiga] Locking on to enemy ships allows you to blast them with missiles.

» [Amiga] Surfaces and terrain of different planets are pleasingly diverse.

Stevenson Holdings
Buy Sell Item Price per t Stock Cargo
Narcotics ¢1264.2 1t -
Animal Skins ¢1605.4 9t -
Live Animals ¢1866.0 20t -
Slaves ¢2001.1 10t -
Hand Weapons ¢993.0 3t -
Battle Weapons ¢1201.6 6t -
Nerve Gas ¢1591.8 - -
Radioactives ¢-8.4 123t -
Remaining Used
Cargo Space 0 4 Cash
Cabins 0 0 ¢592.1
Choose Buy or Sell to trade one unit.
Landed
Comms Link

» [Amiga] Trading on the shady black market can be risky yet lucrative.

» [Amiga] Getting up close and personal with a pirate ship.

Olympus Village Federal HQ
Suggested Responses:
Deliver requisition forms to the Arcturus system (-2,0) by midnight on 18-Jan-3200. You will be paid ¢550.
Deliver some superconducting wire to the Delta Pavonis system (-1,-2) by midnight on 15-Jan-3200. You will be paid ¢700.
Deliver some documents to the Beta Hydri system (0,-2) by midnight on 18-Jan-3200. You will be paid ¢450.
Deliver paperwork to the Wolf 630 system (-2,-1) by midnight on 12-Jan-3200. You will be paid ¢650.
More...
Remaining Used
Cargo Space 8 0 Cash
Cabins 0 0 ¢100.0
Listed above are mercenary missions on offer appropriate to your current security and combat ratings with us.
Landed
Comms Link

» [Amiga] If this chap says a mission is not dangerous, take it with a pinch of salt.

» [Amiga] Different ship models can excel in various ways, from combat to transportation.

CONVERSION CAPERS

ENTERING THE FINAL FRONTIERS

AMIGA

■ Playing the original game on a standard Amiga 500 offers a decent experience, but you might notice things getting a bit slow around planets. The Amiga 1200 fares better. The enhanced version released for the Amiga CD32 improves the game with extra touches and more fluidity.

ATARI ST

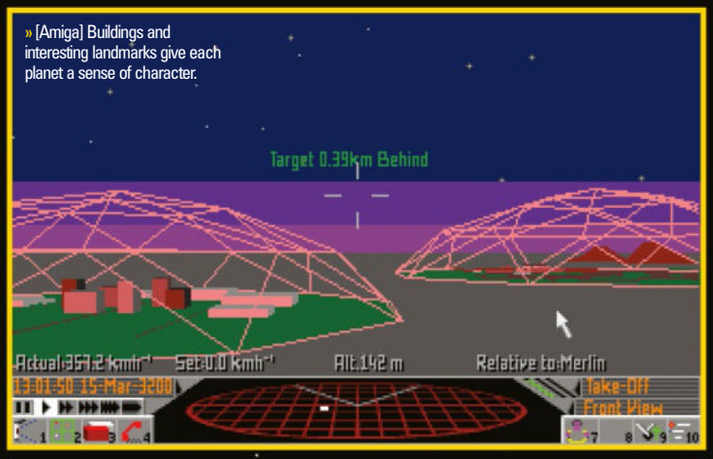
■ This is essentially the same as the Amiga game, but with certain stripped back elements. The lower-resolution graphics are noticeable when you look down at the surface of planets, and the simplified sound is quite tinny. Overall though the performance is pleasingly nippy.

PC

■ The 1997 PC port was handled by Chris Sawyer, who is well known for creating *Rollercoaster Tycoon* and *Transport Tycoon*. Chris added texture-mapped graphics, optimised performance and fixed bugs. Just note that many people report struggling to get the audio working well through emulation.

» [Amiga] Space stations clearly operate a very tight dress code.

» [Amiga] Hyperspace jumps are your instant route from one star system to another.



» [Amiga] Buildings and interesting landmarks give each planet a sense of character.

Earth: World with indigenous life and oxygen atmosphere
Mass 1.00 Earth masses
Surface temperature 22°C
Major Starports London,Paris,Tokyo,New York,Moscow,New San Francisco,Sydney
Orbital period 365 days
Orbital radius 1.000 A.U.
Orbit Ecc. and Incl. 0.017,0.0°
Sol
Dist. 0.00 light years
Type G yellow star
Historic Federal capital. Administration and Tourism.
Manual Control
Galactic Map

» [Amiga] Studying the details of our current star system on the galactic map.

▶ some of the best 3D environments we have ever seen on the Amiga. Yes, there is limitless gameplay time, but even so, it has to be said that *Frontier* is just not very much fun." It's a reminder that both *Elite* and *Frontier* are among those games for which your mileage may vary depending on your appetite for open-ended, complex space adventuring. In any case, the appeal of the game was wide enough for *Frontier* to achieve commercial success. It became the highest selling game in Europe in 1993 according to Gallup, even despite only three months of the year remaining when the game was launched.

It was a result good enough for David to name his company after it. At the start of 1994, David founded Frontier Developments and released a more refined Amiga CD32 version of *Frontier: Elite II*. Not long after came a sequel. *Frontier: First Encounters* was released on PC in 1995. Built on the foundations of its predecessor, *First Encounters* put much more emphasis on storytelling and completing more elaborate missions. In the years to come, Frontier Developments would grow its reputation around strategy games such as *Planet Coaster* and *Jurassic World Evolution*, whilst also keeping the legacy of the *Elite* series going strong. *Elite Dangerous* was launched in 2014 after a successful Kickstarter. The game still maintains a large playerbase on PC and consoles. The same year it was released, David was awarded an OBE for services to the UK games industry, and the next year he cofounded the Raspberry Pi Foundation, which any retro gamers who have dabbled in the Raspberry Pi line of single-board computers will probably appreciate.

"ELITE DANGEROUS HAS TAKEN THE BATON AND MOVED ON STILL FURTHER"
DAVID BRABEN

David is full of enthusiasm when we ask how the latest entry in the series has moved the dial from *Frontier*. "*Elite Dangerous* has taken the baton and moved on still further. It takes the level of detail and sophistication of the simulation to a much higher level, including the simulation technology, even to the extent it has included star systems in the simulation before they were discovered," says David. As an example of this, NASA announced the discovery of the Trappist 1 system in 2017, with its press release declaring, "This system of seven rocky worlds – all of them with the potential for water on their surface – is an exciting discovery in the search for life on other worlds." As was reported by Polygon at the time, the algorithm of *Elite Dangerous* had already, by that point, created a similar system with the right number and sizes of planets, in the right place relative to our solar system. This seems mind-blowing to us – that a game can be somewhat predictive of real-life astronomical observation. How has *Elite Dangerous* achieved that level of simulation? "It uses a 'missing mass' model to determine the locations, mass, age, type, metallicity, etc of each star system," summarises David. "A large database of more than 150,000 real objects (including all the objects visible in the night sky) initially populate the galaxy – both near and far – and then the simulation fills in the missing mass with smaller, fainter stars."

It's an awe-inspiring mechanic to ponder. If it makes you feel like revisiting the procedurally generated star system of *Frontier: Elite II*, you can find officially released shareware versions of the game online, ready to play with an emulator. There is also *Elite Dangerous* on modern platforms, along with newer games inspired by the *Elite* series such as *No Man's Sky*, *EVE Online* and *Star Citizen*. Whichever cosmos you choose, the endless stars await. ✱

ROUND
HIGH SC
PLAYER
LEVEL
NEXT

Megapanel

DELIVERS A PANEL BEATING

» MEGA DRIVE » 1990 » NAMCO

When I was a kid, *The Complete Sega Solution* was one of my greatest sources of gaming knowledge. It was a book full of reviews and tips for Master System and Mega Drive games, put together by the people who would later establish the magazine *Sega Pro*, and I read it until it literally fell to pieces. One game I discovered through this book was *Megapanel*, a puzzle game that was represented with a single black-and-white screenshot of a bunch of blocks against a rather nice anime-style backdrop of a woman with a camel.

The gameplay is simple. Coloured blocks rise from the bottom of the screen, and you need to rearrange them to match three or more of the same colour in rows or columns. That will sound familiar to fans of the *Panel De Pon* or *Puzzle League* games, but rather than swapping pairs as in those games, you have to move blocks in a sliding puzzle fashion. It's far trickier though, for two reasons – firstly, the sliding system means blocks can become trapped in long columns, reducing your opportunities to clear them. Secondly, you need to clear blocks in particular ways in the solo modes. In Exercise mode, you'll often have to clear a certain colour and in a certain orientation, while in Pin-Up mode the board position of the blocks you clear determines which parts of the main image are revealed. Since the speed ramps up quite quickly, even seasoned puzzle game fans will find it truly challenging.

Unfortunately, the book didn't specify that *Megapanel* was a Japanese import. I searched high and low whenever we visited a market stall or second-hand shop but never found it, never knowing why. But hey, it could have been worse – the same book reviewed the Mega Drive version of *Tetris*, and I would have *really* been out of luck if I'd become obsessed with that.

MAGAZINE CRAFT

PHIL SOUTH

From the skillo world of Your Sinclair to the Amiga revolution and beyond, the words of Phil 'Snouty' South have been entertaining gamers and tech fans since the mid-Eighties. Join Retro Gamer as we catch up with some of the best – and craziest – moments of his career

Words by Graeme Mason

THEN

Phil began his career at the short-lived Argus Press magazine *Software Today*, before moving across to Dennis Publishing (then known as Sportscene Specialist Press) and *Your Spectrum* and *Your 64*. Then, he most memorably penned jokes dressed-up-as-reviews as a staff writer for the ZX Spectrum magazine *Your Sinclair*, while also guesting on other Dennis publications, such as *Computer Shopper*.

NOW

Following his stint at Dennis, Phil gathered enough clients to venture out, blinking, into the world as a full-time freelancer. He began writing for multiple Future publications, chiefly *Amiga Shopper* and *Amiga Format* and featured regularly as *Edge* magazine's back-page roving reporter. Today, he continues to arrange words in a vaguely legible manner, mainly for those new-fangled things called websites and for his fiction novels.

So Phil, how did your writing career begin?
I was mucking about with being a writer around 1984. I was talking about being a writer. A friend of mine said I should be a writer. I wanted to be a writer my whole life. But, y'know, you can't earn a living at it. Then my friend, John Molloy, said it depended on whether you knew the right people, and he introduced me to Kevin Cox, who at the time was working at a place called Argus Specialist Publications in Golden Square, London.

Kevin would go on to edit and publish *Your Sinclair*, of course.
That's right, but back then, he employed me on a magazine called *Software Today*. There I reviewed MSX games on cartridge, C64 games and not many ZX Spectrum games, weirdly. The thing is, though, I didn't actually have a computer at the time, so I reviewed the games by looking at the cover, reading the instructions, and trying to figure out what they might be like, then reviewing them based on my impressions.

[Retro Gamer is, for once, speechless]
Haha! This was the Wild West, man, a bloodbath. You could do anything you liked and nobody cared. It was a niche interest back then. But I figured it couldn't go on, so I got in touch with an old friend from drama class who ran the computer room at my old college. I could use the room for as long as I liked, as long as I left him the games I reviewed. He ran a two-man crew that used to, erm, bootleg games. I used to sit behind a bookcase, in front of a C64, for ages with people clustered around me playing a game.

Sportscene's Roger Mumford eventually poached Kevin – how did you feel when that happened?
I was devastated because I thought that was the end of my journalism career right there. But Kevin said, "Come on over, we'll get you working on *Your Spectrum*."

Phew! Tell us about that predecessor to *Your Sinclair*.
It was very techy and trainspottery, and a little bit dry. In fact, it was as dry as old toast, and Kevin brought me in to make it funnier. I reviewed the games for it, which they realised were becoming popular, and starting to outnumber the word processor reviews. They then decided to relaunch it and change the style, making it more like a computer game version of *Smash Hits*.

The change caused some mild controversy at the time…
It was probably because there were no more listings for productivity software or anything like that. It was games and entertainment-focussed. We were all serious journalists, and Kevin was an old-school newsman, but we were not very serious people, so it went uphill or downhill from there, depending on your point of view.

What was it like writing reviews for the rebranded *Your Sinclair*?
We used to play a game and have a core of an idea of what we thought about it, which we would slip into the review at some point. Then, basically, we'd write 200 words of jokes, myself and Berks [Marcus Berkmann] chucking one-liners back and forth before stringing them together. We used to joke that we'd tell Teresa [Maughan, editor from 1987-89] the review was done, and she'd ask if there was anything about the game in it.

What was magazine production like back then?
Insanely convoluted, the stone knives and bearskins era of publishing. I would

» Phil's big break, where he 'reviewed' games.

» Phil wrote for *Your Sinclair*'s predecessor, *Your Spectrum*.

sometimes handwrite reviews, other times use a typewriter. It was archaic at first, but it gradually improved.

How would you take screenshots for the mag?
There was a windowless kitchen at the back of the building, so when you shut the door, it was pitch black. I would go in there with a Speccy, a monitor, and a little red button box we had specially made, which froze the computer and screen. Before becoming a writer, I was a photographer, so I'd take a long exposure picture of the screen, which was really crisp, but it took ages.

> "I wanted to be a writer my whole life"
> PHIL SOUTH

Kevin Cox became publisher in 1987, and Teresa 'T'zer' Maughan took on the editorial reins, instigating *Your Sinclair*'s wackiest period.
When Kevin was the editor, we were on a fairly tight leash. I was a very unruly 25 year old, and I talked too much. Kevin didn't like that in the office; he preferred it to be stony silence. He worked hard, and really late, but I didn't like to do that as I lived out of town. Teresa would stay late, but wouldn't insist that everybody else do the same. It was a much lighter, happier place to be.

One of the most significant changes was with the magazine's covers, which suddenly became a lot more daring.
Kevin was quite daring, but Teresa was ever-so-slightly more daring. She'd show the covers to Berks and me, and we'd be like, "Fucking hell, is that allowed?" There were a few controversies, but the key was not to piss off distribution, 'cos if they didn't handle it, you were screwed.

How did you get the nickname 'Snouty'?
That was Berks. Being a working-class kind of chap, I used to hop up every now and then to get some cigarettes, and would always say, "I'm just nipping up to get some snouts." Markus was a complete chocoholic and would ask for a Topic and a Bounty, Teresa would have a bag of crisps, and I'd get my snout. Berks, being an upper-class kind of chap, for fun, called me Snouty; everyone laughed, and it stuck, following me around for years.

Was there any culture clash between you and Marcus Berkmann?
Initially, I thought, he's such a stuck-up toff, he won't fit in here. But we became the best of friends. We're actually very alike – it didn't matter where we came from, our humour was very similar. We also shared the same interests – *Star Trek* and old British comedies – so we got along fabulously.

Like *Crash*'s Lloyd Mangram, *Your Sinclair*

» Yeah, we're not sure about this one, Phil.

My FAVOURITE MAGAZINE

While Phil obviously loves *Your Sinclair*, he did single out a certain cover. "The *Short Circuit* cover is definitely my favourite," he says. "I think it's the perfect synthesis of the cover image and logo, positioned in the sky. I don't know if it was a hot game or not, but it certainly was a marketing success. I think that might have also been Marcus Berkmann's first issue."

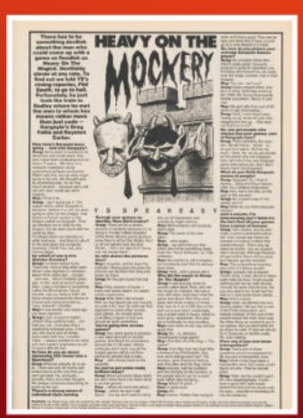
I REMEMBER WHEN

A NARROW ESCAPE
"I was almost run over at my desk. I was in early, eating a sandwich, and there was a huge crash and smoke everywhere. A woman had started her car, slammed her foot on the accelerator, but the steering lock was on, and she drove straight into the front of our office. Fortunately, our receptionist wasn't there."

» Games such as *Sam Fox Strip Poker* gave Phil a chance to stretch his japes even further.

My BEST INTERVIEW

"We did quite a few interviews for *Your Sinclair*, and my favourite has always been the one we did with Gargoyle Games," Phil tells us. "I'd reviewed one of its games, *Heavy On The Magick*, but I thought they were all tremendous. Difficult, and sometimes a bit obscure, but I loved playing them. Anyway, we filed off to Gargoyle's offices – no Zoom calls in these olden days – and they were just hilarious. It was Greg Follis and Roy Carter, and they were like a sort of Seventies comedy duo. I mean, a third of the interview was unprintable because the language was so profane, but it was one of the funniest afternoons of my life," Phil continues. "We had a great time, but I struggled to put the piece together because of the unprintable hilarity and very little talk about the games themselves! I think Teresa may have even asked me to call them up to get a bit more meat for the feature. I enjoyed interviewing people, transcribing their words and capturing the moment, so I always said yes. Every once in a while, I try to track down Follis and Carter – it's a shame they remain so elusive."



» A feature on game designer programs by Phil in *Personal Computing Today*.

'employed' fictional writers, the love-struck pair of Rachael and Gwyn.
[Laughs] Yeah, they were both John Minson. He worked for *Crash* and liked the idea of writing under a pseudonym. He also wanted to keep a low profile as he wasn't supposed to be working for us. He was one of the funniest and craziest guys I've ever met.

> "I was a very unruly 25 year old, and I talked too much"
> PHIL SOUTH

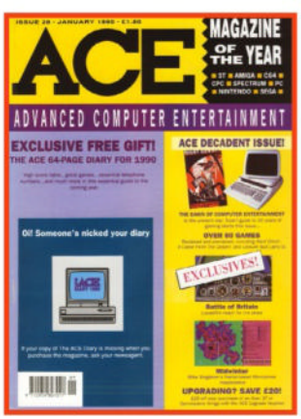
Speaking of *Crash*, was there a rivalry there?
We had sticker wars with them at a trade show – they were sticking their stickers on our stall, and we were sticking ours on theirs. The trick was to do it without being observed. But the rivalry was actually quite affectionate, the sort of ribbing that you get in a workplace. Kevin spent a lot of time at Newsfield, and he was friends with Graeme Kidd and Gary Penn, and we knew most of them as well. However, our rivalry with *Sinclair User* was very much genuine. It was based on the fact that we thought they were boring. Which they were. But *Crash*, that was different. That was amicable mockery.

Being the Eighties, we imagine there were a few lunchtimes down the pub?
Every lunchtime! I got hired at a pub, we celebrated there, and subsequently spent every day of working on the magazine in the pub. At Rathbone Place, there was a pub a few doors up called The Wheatsheaf, which became an extension of the office. Marcus always said it was one of the booziest jobs he's had. In truth, we didn't drink a lot at lunchtime, but we drank a lot in the evenings. We were all in our mid-20s. It would kill me stone dead now.

Apart from reviews, what else did you do on *Your Sinclair*?
I had many jobs. I wrote the beginning section, news items, adverts and the coupon page, writing literally all day, off the top of my head, writing jokes. It was a fantastic grounding as a writer.

And of course, you curated the hugely important tips section.
Kevin and Teresa considered them a very important part of the magazine. The content was valuable to readers, and the more of that we could do, the more value we would add to the magazine. Plus, the research and testing of the tips were 80% complete, so all I had to do was verify that they worked and write a few jokes in response. It was great value for the mag.

What did editing the tips section involve?
Opening the envelopes, reading submissions,



» Phil freelanced for Future's popular multiformat mag, *ACE*.

» *Amiga Shopper* was one of many Amiga magazines Phil freelanced for.

» Issue Six of *Your Sinclair*, dated June '86, Phil's first as a staff writer.

» *Your Spectrum* morphed into *Your Sinclair* in 1986, and the Spectrum world changed forever.

testing them, transcribing, writing the intro, writing responses if required, retyping listings and so on. There was this one kid, called [David] McCandless, who bought games on the day of release and cracked them straight away, week after week. I called him and sent him some games, requesting he crack them, which he did, three days later. We did it again. He sent them back three days later. Eventually, we saved ourselves the postage and hired him. We did the same with this kid, Mischa Welsh, who kept sending us these amazing, massive maps which were good enough for framing. He did this time after time. So again, we hired him.

How do you look back on editing the tips section now?
It was a breeze, and apart from the laborious retyping, the readers did most of the work for me. All I had to do was come up with some good jokes, which pretty much sums up my entire journalistic career, actually!

Were you ever under pressure to favourably review games?
We were a little from the ad department. They'd sometimes give assurances in return for an exclusive, and that would cause friction, especially if the game was tosh. Which often happened. Especially the licensed games. We really resented having to put the brakes on our sarcasm. Because we loved sarcasm. Having said that, I famously always marked things too generously because I just thought everything was amazing in that annoying puppyish, bouncy way I had. Teresa was often knocking points off or asking if I really wanted to give that game a nine.

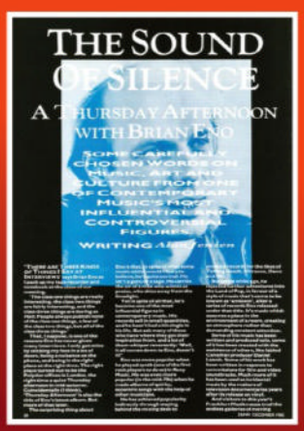
***Your Sinclair* famously engendered a high level of reader interaction.**
User engagement wasn't really a thing back then, as interaction was limited to phone calls or letters. Considering that, we had a massive amount of interaction. I know because it was my job to deal with the postbag every day, and it always had more stuff than you could possibly look at.

You left your position as a staff writer at *Your Sinclair* in 1989. What happened?
I was burned out writing non-stop jokes and doing game reviews, which were becoming very similar. There were only a handful of game types, so saying the same thing over and over was becoming a cliché. I was beginning to write bollocks. Also, I was commuting from Hemel Hempstead, which was tiresome, and I was thinking about starting a family. So it seemed a natural break to go freelance from home for Dennis and Future. Berks jokes that I jumped before I was pushed. In reality, I mostly just couldn't do the drinking and the joke-writing any more, and without those things, I was of no use to *Your Sinclair*.

What do you think made *Your Sinclair* so special and much loved today?
The sense of a shared community, and the building of that, was so strong that it still

My PROUDEST MOMENT

"Journalistically, my proudest moments were interviewing people. It was more the sort of journalism I wanted to do after people stopped asking me to review games. My favourites were Richard O'Brien, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel and Terry Pratchett. The Brian Eno one wasn't games related, but it is the one I'm most known for and the one piece of work that's been quoted in books and magazines, and continues to be to this day."

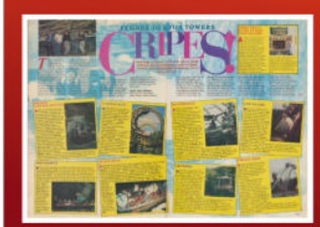


I REMEMBER WHEN

DAMES OR DRAG?
"Berks and I dressed up as supposed pantomime dames for a Christmas competition, but we looked more like drag queens thanks to all the make-up. As befitted the theme, Teresa was dressed up in the principal boy role."

My BEST PRESS TRIP

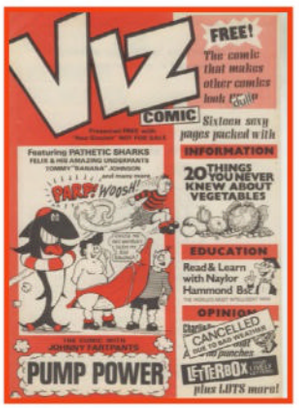
"We were sort of diversifying, trying to accentuate the lifestyle rather than just focussing on Sinclair Spectrum games," says Phil about the various trips the team would go on. "Part of that idea was to build a culture – it's pointless putting out a magazine and just printing reviews, because that's really cold and lifeless. So, we focussed on building a community with personalities. So we went to the arcades. And we either got invited or strong-armed our way into Alton Towers. I think it was me, Marcus, Teresa, Darrell King and Pete George. It was fabulous: a lady with a walkie-talkie met us at the front gate, walked us to the first ride, and put us at the front of the queue. We did the ride. She then grabbed us and took us to the next ride. And we did every single ride at Alton Towers in the space of about an hour and a half. Which, I have to say, was quite intense! There's a wonderful picture on one ride with Marcus screaming, I've got my head between my knees, and Darrell King is lounging on the back seat with his hair all perfect as if he's on a sofa at a club."



I REMEMBER WHEN

THE VIZ GIVEAWAY

"There was a huge fuss when we gave away a special edition of *Viz*. The thing was, our version of *Viz* was heavily sanitised, but we still had to withdraw it and have it put in a wrapper."



» The *Viz* giveaway comic that created such a fuss.

MALE MAIL
young lady who tells you how much she loves you, and how handsome you are, and what a wonderful body you've got, and how every time she sees your picture she goes WILD with desire?
I'm so desperate to find a new idol I would even consider Phil South.
Claire Terry
Southampton, Hants
You must be desperate if you'd consider Phil 'Gis a sandwich' South. I'd hate you to resort to such a low level so here, just for you, is a line-up of the chunks who work on YS. Take your pick! Ed
MARCUS BERKMANN
DARRELL KING
PHIL SOUTH
PETER GEORGE

» Phil had to endure constant gentle mockery from both readers and colleagues.

» Phil guested for multiple music publications in addition to his computing work.

exists today. If you sent us a letter, there was a scarily good chance we'd reply. If you put a phone number in it, we'd call and ask for more to try and gee people up. And the shared humour, which went further than most editors would have allowed at the time, because it was so surreal. Other publishers would have said it was too wacky, and we don't know what it means, and half the time we didn't either! But it was funny. Teresa had a surreal sense of humour too, and together we wrote the guts of the mag. And even when we'd all left, and it got taken over by Future, they carried on in the same theme, with the same DNA.

As a freelancer, you continued working for Dennis, right?

I continued writing for *Your Sinclair*. Meanwhile, Dennis had launched *Computer Shopper* magazine in 1988. Graeme Kidd came from Newsfield to help launch it, and we became friends. I worked on the first issue and carried on after I left *Your Sinclair* for another 12 years.

YOUR SINCLAIR
November 1987 £1
WEREWOLVES OF LONDON
A Game To Get Your Teeth Into!
We Test-Ride
ALTON TOWERS
Have You Got The Guts?
Martech's
SLAINE THE KING
Preview And Preview Inside!
WIN A SKATEBOARD! PLUS 20 COPIES OF
720°
MERCENARY • COMBAT SCHOOL • SUPER HANG-ON
DOUBLE DRAGON — WE REVIEW THE LATEST CON-UP SMASH
EIGHT PAGES PACKED WITH MAPS AND TIPS

» Another much-complained-about *Your Sinclair* cover.

Wasn't that a considerable difference in style and tone to be working on at the same time as *Your Sinclair*?

I was more of a columnist for *Computer Shopper* than a reviewer, so there were still jokes. I had one column called Creative Technology and another called Amiga Shopper, which was prior to the Future magazine of the same name – a mag I also worked on. The Creative Technology column was an excuse to blag a lot of computer kit. And with Amiga Shopper, I basically had a good reason to phone up every manufacturer of Amiga kit and get them to send it to me so I could review it in the magazine. That's one thing I really missed, being able to call someone up and say, "Can you send me one of your little gizmos?" I've got a little bit of that back again, blogging for a site based in Singapore called Make Tech Easier. Which is lovely.

Were you apprehensive about going freelance full time?

Fortunately, the columns I wrote for *Computer Shopper* paid quite well, and I knew that if the worst came to the worst, I could pay my mortgage and bills. So it took the pressure off, and I had the rest of the time to make more money.

And one of those avenues took you to Future Publishing…

Yep. Kevin and Graeme [Kidd] were working there, and they invited me down. I was still living in Hemel Hempstead, and for a few years, I would commute to Bath every two or three weeks, staying either with Graeme or in lodging houses that Future paid for. I was working on various magazines, living in a house with Steve Jarratt and a few other writers. It was like college – going to work during the day, then coming home, watching football, getting takeout and playing *Sensible Soccer*. It was fabulous.

But it couldn't last…

I got fed up with the travel, and my missus at

SLAVE TO THE RHYTHM
Yeah, right. You know when the band's really cooking and the drums are beating fast, the bass is thumping like a heartbeat and... yeah! Wooah! Yee har! Phil South's got this amazing new Cheetah MK5 MIDI master keyboard and he's plinking away. Take it away Phil... Oi! Come back!

» Phil combined his love of music and technology for an article in *Your Sinclair*.

» This was Phil's final issue as a staff writer for *Your Sinclair*.

the time was unhappy at me being away so much. So we decided to move to Somerset.

What magazines were you writing for at this point?
Apparently, I worked on almost every Amiga magazine, at least that's what people keep telling me. Evidently, I also worked for *PC Zone*, but that's something else I have no recollection of!

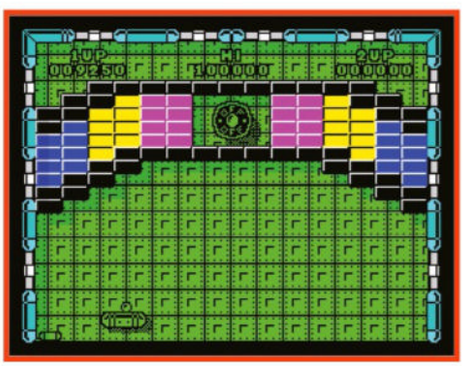
> "Despite my best efforts to remain a prankish jokester, I had to sort of grow up and do some serious journalism"
> PHIL SOUTH

What type of writing were you doing at this point?
Despite my best efforts to remain a prankish jokester, I had to sort of grow up and do some serious journalism. I have Kevin to thank for that, but mostly Graeme Kidd. It was like being at college working with him; you learned so much every day. I've always played and enjoyed music, so I began working on a lot of music magazines, too. And the culmination was towards the end of the Nineties, when I started working for the *Microsoft Developer Network* journal. That sounds very serious and dull, and in many ways it was – but it was also quite fun to be a serious journalist. I also got to go on some fabulous jollies, such as when they flew me out to Finland to interview a group of Finnish application developers. So it had its moments.

And finally, what are you up to today, Phil?
I do all sorts of interesting things for Make Tech Easier. I ran its YouTube channel for a few years, which helped me develop my skills, such as voiceover work. I have a background in musical theatre, so that wasn't outside my capabilities. I've also been working for David McCandless for many years. His enterprise is called Information Is Beautiful, and he's an international speaker in high demand for his data visualisation and journalism work.

And you scratched that itch and finally wrote a novel.
Yes! It's called *A Mind For Mischief*, and it came out in 2022. It's a multiple-worlds/alternative world sci-fi story set in a supposedly utopian version of our world, where we have defeated fascism. We still manage to screw it up somehow, though!

Our thanks to Phil for his time. You can check out his book, *A Mind For Mischief*, written under the pseudonym Philip Why, on Amazon.

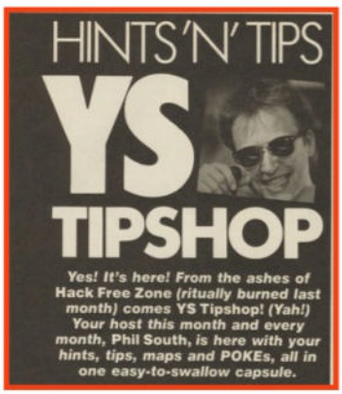


» [ZX Spectrum] *Your Sinclair* leapt in popularity with the advent of covertapes. This is the excellent *Batty*.

I REMEMBER WHEN

COMPUTER SHOPPER
"When I started working on Your Spectrum, I had to buy a Spectrum. I borrowed the money from my dad, telling him it would be good for doing the accounts on, and bought it from Boots in Hemel Hempstead."

» Part of the madcap *Your Sinclair* gang, Teresa 'T'zer' Maughan.


HINTS 'N' TIPS
YS
TIPSHOP
Yes! It's here! From the ashes of Hack Free Zone (ritually burned last month) comes YS Tipshop! (Yah!) Your host this month and every month, Phil South, is here with your hints, tips, maps and POKEs, all in one easy-to-swallow capsule.

» Running the Tipshop was one of Phil's favourite parts of writing for *Your Sinclair*.

I REMEMBER WHEN

A FISHY TALE
"I helped make an actual game when John Molloy and I were talking about the hardest way to start an adventure game. He mentioned it to Magnetic Scrolls, who loved the idea of starting as a fish in a bowl. I ended up writing the story, which John and Rob [Steggles] adapted into a game."

ULTIMATE GUIDE

FINAL FANTASY VI

» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI*'s opening crawl sets the stage for an epic story.

» [SNES] Magitek Knights march toward Narshe.

» [SNES] Terra speaks with Bannon, the leader of the rebellious Returners.

TINGED WITH STEAM AND REBELLION, FINAL FANTASY'S LAST SUPER NES FORAY IS A CLASSIC THAT DOES THINGS, AND GOES PLACES FEW OTHER GAMES AT THE TIME (OR SINCE) WERE WILLING TO TRY. FROM ITS ENORMOUS CAST, EMPHASIS ON PLAYER AGENCY, AND A TRULY SHOCKING MID-GAME TWIST, FINAL FANTASY VI HAS IT ALL

WORDS BY AIDAN MOHER

In 1991, hot off the heels of shipping his fifth massively popular *Final Fantasy* title, series creator Hironobu Sakaguchi found no well-deserved rest. Instead, he immediately pivoted to development of the next game in the series, *Final Fantasy VI*, and another major development, this one more personal: he was now a father.

Sakaguchi has always allowed his life experiences to shape his art, from memories of his mother to the science-fantasy mashup of *Ultima*, he inserts himself into his games in a way that lays bare his most vulnerable moments. And *Final Fantasy VI* (originally released as *Final Fantasy III* in the West) was no different. Even as Sakaguchi's experience as a new father shaped his personal life, it also defined the themes and ideas forming the foundation of his next game: birth, death and rebirth.

Set in a melancholy world of industry, and Empire, *Final Fantasy VI*, like many *Final Fantasy* games before it, is a game about the power of collective action against tyranny and oppression. It opens in the town of Narshe, a northern mining town officially maintaining neutrality in the larger world conflict, but housing a group of rebels called the Returners. When an Imperial Magitek Knight named Terra Branford awakens in the hands of the Returners, with no memory but her name, she sets in motion a series of events that will, quite literally, destroy the world and rebuild it again from the ashes.

"THIS INDUSTRIAL, STEAMPUNK STYLE WAS A MAJOR DEPARTURE FOR A SERIES THAT TYPICALLY DABBLED IN HEAVILY DUNGEONS & DRAGONS-INSPIRED EPIC FANTASY WORLDS"

"One of our staff really wanted to do something with an industrial revolution atmosphere, so that became the basis: a world of magi-teki armor, metal and machinery," explained Tetsuya Takahashi in 1994 via a shmuplations.com translation. Though *Final Fantasy* had always incorporated some science fiction elements into its world building – going all the way back to the first game in the series, which featured time travel – this industrial, Steampunk style was a major departure for a series that typically dabbled in heavily *Dungeons & Dragons*-inspired epic fantasy worlds.

"The first thing we did was to collect every individual's ideas, and then we just got started with the actual development," explained Takahashi in the same interview. The graphics director (and *Xenoblade Chronicles* creator) on *Final Fantasy VI* explained that while having a cohesive "master planner doc" was a valid way to build a game, his team didn't work that way. "That's not how things work at Square. We develop the game in an on-going way, by mixing together everyone's ideas and input."

Like its wide-ranging creative team, *Final Fantasy VI* focusses heavily on its ensemble cast, without a traditional main character leading the way. With over 14 playable characters, its cast of heroes dwarfed other games in the series, and was significantly larger than other contemporary games. This created a different type of player agency from earlier *Final Fantasy* titles, by allowing the player to craft their party around different characters – each with their own special ability – rather than

» [SNES] Who will come out on top in this ferocious two-on-two battle? Hint: it's the good guys.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KEY PLAYERS IN FINAL FANTASY VI'S MASSIVE CAST

TERRA BRANFORD

As *Final Fantasy VI*'s story wefts and wends around its primary protagonist, Terra undergoes huge physical and emotional changes as she discovers her magical heritage.

KEFKA PALAZZO

He might look like a clown, but Kefka brings no joy. Broken by experiments meant to turn him into a supersoldier, *Final Fantasy VI*'s antagonist does something few evil villains manage: he wins.

CELES CHERE

A highly regarded general in the Gestahlian Empire, the Rune Knight Celes is torn between loyalty to the country that's given her everything, and the strong morals and sense of justice that reside deep within her.

LOCKE COLE

Everybody's favourite thief… err, treasure hunter, Locke Cole is running from the past and trying to find every chest, valuable gem and adventure he can find along the way. His frivolous demeanour hides a heart of gold.

MADUIN

A magical Esper living in Esper Village, Maduin sets *Final Fantasy VI*'s plot in motion when he meets a young human named Madeline Branford. Forbidden love, and a daughter named Terra, follow.

CID

Every *Final Fantasy* needs its Cid, and this time around he's a reclusive Gestahlian scientist in a yellow rain slicker working to figure out how to convert the natural magic of Espers into Magicite usable by human soldiers.

EMPEROR GESTAHL

Grand Daddy Gestahl bit off more than he could chew when he started trying to make supersoldiers by harnessing the magic of Espers. But at least he serves up a mean banquet meal before his Empire burns.

GENERAL LEO CRISTOPHE

You know how every RPG has that cool character who joins your party for a few fights? That's General Leo. He's a bad guy, but he's also the best. There were rumours about how players could get him to join their team.

a bevy of Jobs. Best yet, through the use of Magicite, the game's equippable magic stones that helped characters learn new magic and altered their stat growth, you could even turn burly martial artist Sabin into a top-tier White Mage, or diminutive Relm into a physical beast. The options were endless.

This large cast of characters was a collaborative effort. Takahashi created the Magitek Armor in the opening credits scroll, his wife and fellow *Xenogears* creator Soraya Saga created twin princes Edgar and Sabin Figaro, and *Kingdom Hearts* creator Tetsuya Nomura came up with the mysterious ninja Shadow and the melancholy gambler Setzer.

"For a game with over 14 playable party members, a war tale spanning an entire continent, and an iconic villainous clown that threatens to derail the whole vibe but instead makes it all the more memorable – *Final Fantasy VI* is almost unbelievably coherent," said Nomura in a 2024 GamesRadar interview. You can't say that about *Kingdom Hearts*…

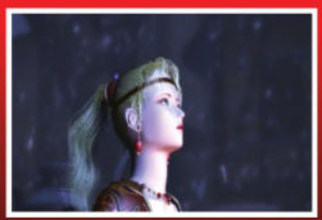
For a game that the series creator considers the most "complete" in the series, *Final Fantasy VI* had a surprisingly hasty development period. Development began in December 1992, shortly after the release of its predecessor, *Final Fantasy V*, and was released less than a year-and-a-half later in Japan, on April 2, 1994. It followed shortly thereafter in October, 1994 in North America, but would not officially hit PAL regions until its release on PlayStation in 2002. While the setting and

UPDATING A CLASSIC

HOW DO YOU PERFECT PERFECTION?

With *Final Fantasy VII* launching the console RPG genre into the stratosphere, and making the PlayStation the go-to console for RPG fans, Square Enix went digging in its back catalogue of legendary Super NES RPGs for games it could reintroduce to a suddenly much larger and more fervent audience. In 1999, it released *Final Fantasy Anthology* in North America, which included the first official English release of *Final Fantasy V* and a more-or-less straight port of *Final Fantasy VI*. Besides a couple of CGI cutscenes and minor features like a sound room and bestiary, all it really added to *Final Fantasy VI* were irritating load times. *Final Fantasy Anthology* was released in Europe in 2002, but, oddly, it included *Final Fantasy IV* and *V*, instead. While Nintendo and Square parted ways during their acrimonious split over disagreements about *Final Fantasy VII* and optical media, they eventually kissed and made up, and among their first projects were portable rereleases of *Final Fantasies IV-VI* on the Game Boy Advance.

Every millennial dreamed of being able to play Super NES games on the go, and these delivered with terrific conversions of many classic games… as long as you can get used to its brighter colour palette and fuzzy music. If you can, you'll find a bevy of fixed bugs and extra content: including a fresh localisation, extra dungeons and a new super boss, the Kaiser Dragon.



» [PlayStation] Blonde-haired Terra Branford looks skyward as snow falls around her in the new CGI intro for *Final Fantasy VI* on the PlayStation.

» [Game Boy Advance] Suited up in Magitek Armor, Terra blasts a wolf in the Game Boy Advance edition of *Final Fantasy VI*.

PLAYING TODAY

THERE'S NEVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO PLAY FINAL FANTASY VI

■ After its original release on the Super NES, *Final Fantasy VI* has seen regular rereleases and remasters on various platforms. None of them are perfect, though they each made attempts to add to the original experience (to varying degrees of success). Nowadays, the most practical way to play *Final Fantasy VI* comes as part of Square Enix's massive *Pixel Remaster* set, which saw major remasters of all the 8 and 16-bit games. These versions offer newly polished pixel-art graphics for each game – leading to a consistent look between all six titles for the first time, including new character sprites redrawn by series creator Kazuko Shibuya – and are widely available on all major gaming platforms and mobile devices.

Whether you buy them as a bundle or pick them up individually, they're all loving renditions of these classic games, but they're also not without flaws. Though Square Enix added a 'retro' option to swap out the generic sans-serif font that launched with the original release, the typography is still awkwardly tiny and inconsistent, which might lead to a problem for some players on smaller screens, and they use the brighter colour palette from the Game Boy Advance rereleases, which is very apparent in *Final Fantasy VI*, which used deeper, richer tones to sell its uniquely dystopian world. Despite these quibbles, they're still some of the best games ever made, and easier to play than ever.

» [Switch] A Megalodoth blasts Locke and a party of Moogles with a Snowstorm attack in the Nintendo Switch version of *Final Fantasy VI Pixel Remaster.*

» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI* features some of the most beautiful combat background scenes on the Super NES.

» [SNES] After escaping Imperial troops in Narshe, Terra meets the raunchy king of Figaro, Edgar.

▶ cast size underwent seismic shifts, *Final Fantasy VI*'s core gameplay was recognisable to series fans. Retaining the Active Time Battle system introduced in *Final Fantasy IV* and used all the way until the series' transition to PlayStation 2 in 2001, *Final Fantasy VI* emphasised quick combat, a large world to explore, and a lot of player agency in character building and party construction.

Ditching the series' popular Job system, which featured heavily in three previous games, *Final Fantasy VI* returned to the more predefined characters of *Final Fantasy IV*, each with its own special ability that matched the Job they best suited. Sabin the martial artist used fighting game-style controller inputs to unleash his Blitz attacks, patient Samurai Cyan waited for an ability bar to slowly reach increasingly more powerful attacks, Rune Knight Celes could absorb enemy magic, and wild child Gau learned attacks directly from enemies.

While *Final Fantasy VI* starts off with a linear structure reminiscent of most other console RPGs available at the time, there's a segment a couple of hours in that forces the player's party into three smaller groups, all with their own missions that you can tackle in any order, once completed, you face down against the game's antagonist, the villainous clown and Gestahlian General Kefka, on a snowy field of battle that requires you to balance all of your gathered characters across three parties.

This taste of nonlinearity leads to one of the most climactic moments in series (and genre) history. As the party faces down Kefka again, desperate to stop him from gaining the power of the Warring Triad, a trio of magical statues on the Floating Continent, something altogether surprising happens: they lose. Kefka wins. The world ends.

The story picks up a year later with Celes, who is living on a small deserted island. With

MEMORABLE MONSTERS

WHELK

■ *Final Fantasy VI*'s very first boss has some tricks up its sleeve. Attack while its head is visible and you'll be victorious in no time. Attack its shell? You'll get blasted.

VARGAS

■ This hard-working martial artist stews under the belief his father, the legendary instructor Duncan Harcourt, favours fellow student, and fan favourite, Sabin Figaro.

GHOST TRAIN

■ Do you remember the first time you suplexed a train? The Ghost Train caps off one of *Final Fantasy VI*'s most melancholy moments with well-earned absurdity.

ULTROS

■ Everybody's favourite octopus shows up to cause trouble when you least expect it, and adds a load of drama to Celes' famous opera house performance.

CHUPON

■ SNORT. Hope you brought a Kleenex, because Ultros' best buddy's got a bad case of the sneezes, and he'll blow you right off your airship if he takes critical damage.

ATMA WEAPON

■ Created alongside the sword of the same name, Atma Weapon guards the Warring Triad and acts as the final boss before the World Of Balance falls into Ruin.

» [SNES] Almost every RPG has an airship, but how many have a casino airship?

» [SNES] *Final Fantasy VI*'s heroes jet-set around the world in Setzer's famous airship called the Blackjack.

» [SNES] Led by Bannon and Terra, the Returners prepare for battle against the Imperial General Kefka and his troops.

» [SNES] Facing down against Kefka in his final form is one of the most iconic battles in the series' history.

her is Cid, a former Gestahlian scientist largely responsible for the technology used to exploit the magical Espers. Together, seemingly alone in the World Of Ruin, Celes must gather fish from a nearby beach to feed Cid. Unbeknownst to the player, feeding Cid the wrong fish leads him to severe illness and death. This melancholy opening to the game's second act is steeped in guilt, regret and longing and culminates in an examination of suicidal ideation and hope.

> "FOR A GAME THAT THE SERIES CREATOR CONSIDERS THE MOST 'COMPLETE' IN THE SERIES, FINAL FANTASY VI HAD A SURPRISINGLY HASTY DEVELOPMENT PERIOD"

Escaping the island, Celes must scour the world during a non-linear second half, seeking out her former companions – some of whom have gone into hiding, others helping as many people as they can – to reassemble the team and defeat Kefka, who now uses the magic of the Warring Triad to lock what remains of the world under an iron fist.

Tying this all together is a scene earlier in the game where you see the relationship between Terra Branford's human mother, Madeline, and Esper father, Maduin, blossom and eventually result in her birth, kicking off the game's main events. "I wanted to have a scene in *Final Fantasy VI* where there's a child who's born," Sakaguchi said in a 2021 IGN interview. "This idea of bringing new life into the world and what that means and the kind of gravity that it has."

Like a baby relying on their parents for every need, Terra's personality in *Final Fantasy VI*'s first act was purposefully passive, explained Sakaguchi in a *Famitsu* interview translated by OneMillionPower. "We did that because we wanted to show her growth as the story progresses. In the process of being manipulated and used by others, she gradually awakens to her own destiny. The awakening of the self, of one's own humanity – those are her themes."

As a new father who once described parenthood as the most "emotionally moving" experience in life, Hironobu Sakaguchi's experiences bringing new life into the world is integral to *Final Fantasy VI*'s story of birth and rebirth, and the power we have in our lives to make good on our promises and build something better out of our mistakes. It's never too late to fight for a better world for those who come after.

LEGENDARY ARTIST YOSHITAKA AMANO STUFFED FFVI FULL OF CLASSIC BEASTS

DOOM GAZE

■ Doom Gaze can be found flying high above the World Of Ruin and will flee from battle after a few turns. Fortunately, his HP doesn't recover between bouts.

TRITOCH

■ *Final Fantasy VI*'s first McGuffin, the Esper Tritoch (also known as Valigarmanda) is found deep in the Narshe mines and is a master of elemental magic.

KEFKA

■ Who knew everybody's favourite clown was so ripped under his costume? With twice as many wings as Sephiroth, it's pretty clear who takes the title of *Final Fantasy*'s best villain.

BRACHOSAUR

■ Killing Brachosaurs in the World Of Ruin was torturous for a kid who loved dinosaurs, but it was the best method for grinding late in the game (and we regret nothing).

BEHEMOTH

■ Among *Final Fantasy*'s most iconic monsters, Behemoth packs a wallop, helping make the Floating Continent one of the toughest dungeons in the game.

MAGITEK ARMOR

■ While you get to ride one of these bad boys at the start of the game, it's not long before you're facing them down in battle. Fun fact: the Magitek Armor featured in *Final Fantasy VI*'s opening march across the snow was designed by *Xenoblade Chronicles* creator Tetsuya Takahashi!

FUEL
S
SW
-5
900
800
700
600
500
mph
CS
TGT
BINGO
-5
-10
-15
Short
MISSILES 47

Air Combat

DOING IT BACKWARDS

» RETROREVIVAL

» PLAYSTATION » 1995 » NAMCO

If there's one franchise I've always enjoyed, it's the *Ace Combat* series. While I care little for traditional flight simulators, the arcade-focussed *Ace Combat* games are far more to my liking and also my skill set.

Weirdly though, my relationship with the long-running series is far from traditional as I didn't actually start playing them until the Xbox 360 came along, meaning I missed all the PlayStation and PlayStation 2 entries. I've since looked at correcting that and in recent years, acquired the first three games in NTSC forms, along with US copies of two of the three PS2 games that were released (I just need *The Belkan War* to complete the trilogy).

Finding myself with some spare time recently, I decided to play through the very first game, *Air Combat*, which I erroneously believed to be a port of Namco's earlier arcade hit. It's actually its own standalone game, and is only loosely based on the arcade original. It also features many of the mechanics and tropes that would become mainstays of the series.

Graphically, *Air Combat* isn't without its issues. The polygon count isn't the best, meaning some of the backgrounds look a little bland and uninteresting, while there's a fair amount of distracting pop-up, particularly when you enter canyons and are required to navigate built-up areas.

And yet, I had a huge amount of fun with Namco's game and completed it over a couple of days. There's nothing too complicated about the control system, there's a good range of different ships to unlock and the branching path nature of the game means that you can always try a different mission if one becomes too challenging.

It's certainly not a masterpiece, but it's easy to see why it reviewed well on release, and led to so many additional games over the years. The sense of taking down a superior air force with your limited number of planes is great and the handling of each different fighter feels very dynamic as you tackle the large number of missions *Air Combat* throws at you. It's fast paced, full of action and satisfies my need for intense blasting, I can't wait to get stuck into the sequel. ✱

THE MAKING OF DESCENT

AFTER THE RELEASE OF DOOM, FOR A WHILE THERE WAS ONE NAME TO SUM UP SIMILAR GAMES: DOOM CLONE. THIS EVEN APPLIED TO GAMES LIKE DESCENT, EVEN THOUGH THE ONLY THING IT HAD IN COMMON WITH DOOM WAS ITS FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

WORDS BY PAUL KAUTZ

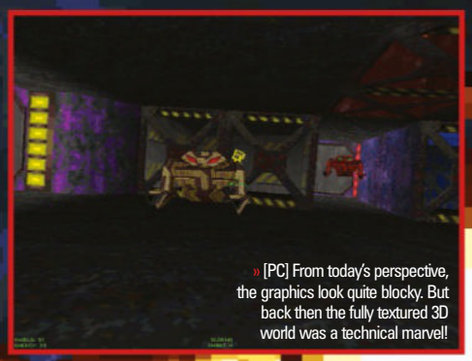
The plunge into the depths of *Descent* began with the ascent of two people: Mike Kulas and Matt Toschlog. The two met at Sublogic in the mid-Eighties, where they were part of the development team of the early *Flight Simulator* games. Shortly thereafter, both moved to Lerner Research, programming games like *Car & Driver* and (after the company merged with Blue Sky Productions to become Looking Glass Studios) *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss*. Their love of textured polygons led them to propose a project to the company's management, a mixture of a flight simulator and a tunnel shooter, which fell on deaf ears. So they left Looking Glass and founded their own company, Parallax Software, in June 1993 to realise their vision.

Descent was originally given the working title *XYZBots* (to be renamed *Miner* later), inspired by *Xybots*, Ed Logg's 1987 arcade classic. *Xybots* was all about destroying robots in 3D tunnels. And that's exactly what Mike and Matt had in mind with *XYZBots*, only with state-of-the-art 1993 technology. The design document described it this way, "You are equipped with an advanced spacecraft with a variety of weapons. Your primary objective is to destroy the colonies. Over time more and more robots will be aware of your presence and will begin to attack. Once you locate and destroy the control centre, you will have a limited amount of time to fly out of the colony before it self-destructs."

In the beginning, Parallax Software consisted only of the two founders: Mike wrote the texture mapping system and the AI routines, and Matt was primarily responsible for programming the 3D geometry and physics simulation. However, other people quickly joined the team, which had an interesting epiphany moment for Matt, as he tells us, "One memory is realising just how many things we had to do to create a whole game from scratch. I remember seeing our artist, Adam Pletcher, working on the *Descent* font and thinking, 'We have to make our own font?'"

Originally, Parallax Software teamed up with shareware giant Apogee to be the game's publisher. However, this partnership did not last long – more on this in the Shareware Connection panel. The sudden loss of funding was a difficult time, as Matt recalls, "We had three employees, very little money, and suddenly no income. So we figured out what we needed to get done was to make a good demo, cut everyone's salary by 30% and work very hard for a few months. We told the employees that if we couldn't find a new publisher for the game that we'd give them their work computers as partial payment. We made a playable demo and a VHS videotape and sent it to every publisher we could." However, only three of them responded: Accolade, Trimark Interactive and Interplay, the latter of which finally took the game under its wings. The freshly renamed *Descent* was originally scheduled to be

> "I REMEMBER THINKING, 'WE HAVE TO MAKE OUR OWN FONT?"
> MATT TOSCHLOG



» [PC] From today's perspective, the graphics look quite blocky. But back then the fully textured 3D world was a technical marvel!

» [PC] The action in *Descent* takes place in all directions. Good 3D orientation is important, a stable stomach even more so.

MATT TOSCHLOG

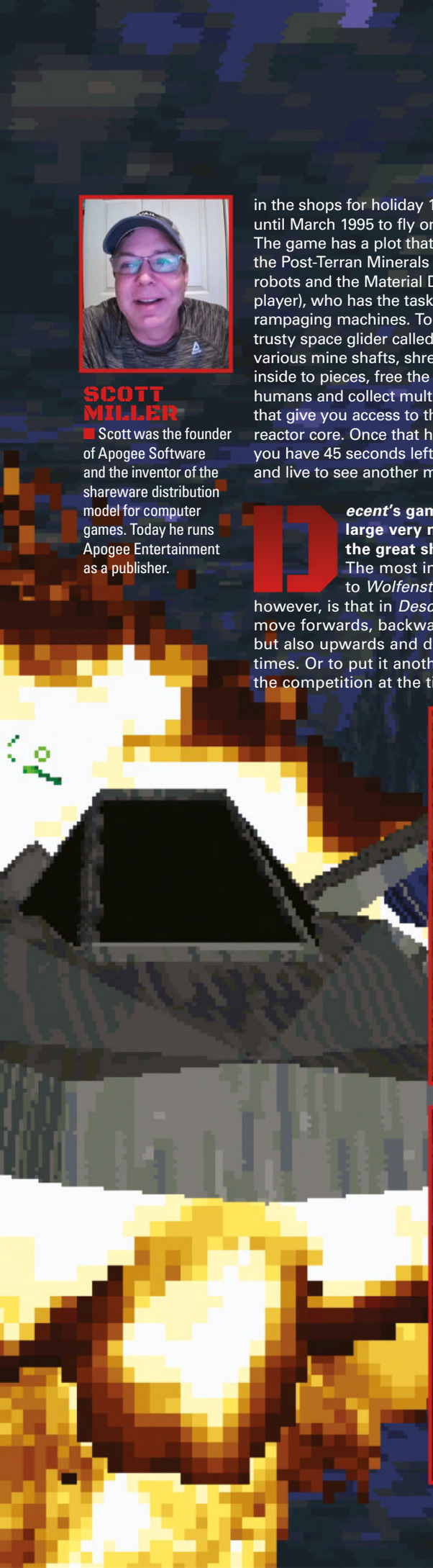
■ Matt was one of the original developers of *Descent*. He went on to found Outrage Games and Reactor Zero, and is now principal programmer at Sony's Santa Monica Studio.

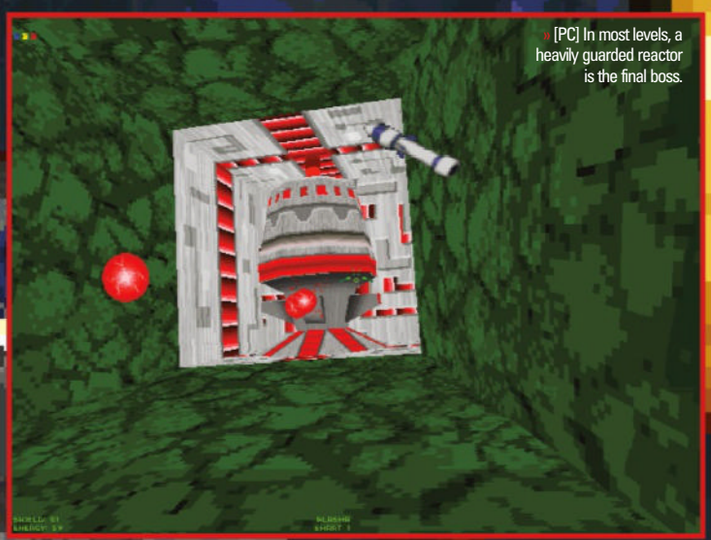
SCOTT MILLER

Scott was the founder of Apogee Software and the inventor of the shareware distribution model for computer games. Today he runs Apogee Entertainment as a publisher.

in the shops for holiday 1994, but it took until March 1995 to fly onto the shelves. The game has a plot that revolves around the Post-Terran Minerals Corporation, crazy robots and the Material Defender (ie the player), who has the task of destroying the rampaging machines. To do this, you fly your trusty space glider called Syssyx through various mine shafts, shred the enemy robots inside to pieces, free the few remaining humans and collect multi-coloured key cards that give you access to the mine's large reactor core. Once that has been destroyed, you have 45 seconds left to reach the exit and live to see another mission.

D*escent*'s gameplay is by and large very much in line with the great shooters of its time. The most important difference to *Wolfenstein 3D* or *Doom*, however, is that in *Descent* you not only move forwards, backwards and sideways, but also upwards and downwards at all times. Or to put it another way, unlike the competition at the time, *Descent* offers a true 3D environment. You fly in all directions, there is no clearly defined ceiling or floor – a feature that even earned the game an entry in the *Guinness Book Of Records* as the first fully three-dimensional first-person shooter. This was possible due to a lot of hard work, as Matt explains, "There were two big challenges: texture mapping and 3D world geometry. Back then everything had to be done in software and true perspective-correct texture mapping required expensive divide operations for every pixel, which we just couldn't do on the hardware we had. Mike and John Slagel, who wrote the texture mappers, had to squeeze savings everywhere they could, which meant doing approximations and special-case optimisations. For world geometry, the important thing was processing and drawing only as much of the 3D world as we needed. We did that by making the world pieces fairly simple (deformed cubes, basically) and developing a 'portal' engine that did a decent job of figuring out what needed to be drawn." ▶





» [PC] In most levels, a heavily guarded reactor is the final boss.

» [PC] Every now and then you also have to take on a particularly heavily armed megabossbot.

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** INTERPLAY
- **DEVELOPER:** PARALLAX SOFTWARE
- **PLATFORM:** PC, PLAYSTATION
- **RELEASED:** 1995
- **GENRE:** 3D ACTION

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DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

FREESPACE 2
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASED: 1999

RED FACTION (PICTURED)
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 2, PC
RELEASED: 2001

SAINTS ROW
PLATFORM: XBOX 360
RELEASED: 2006

WHERE NO ONE DESCENDED BEFORE

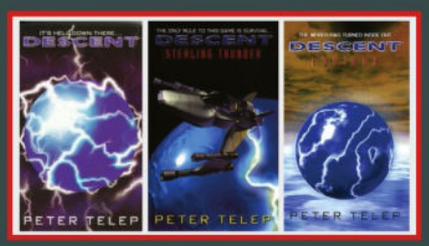
WHAT HAPPENED AFTER DESCENT

After the success of *Descent* on PC and PlayStation, a sequel was only logical, even if, according to Matt, it was originally planned as an add-on, "After the original release we started working on the CD version of *Descent*, which was supposed to include digital audio, better textures and other enhancements. But when *Descent* became a hit, the enhanced version became a sequel. It was basically the same game, but I think we added enough new content to justify it."

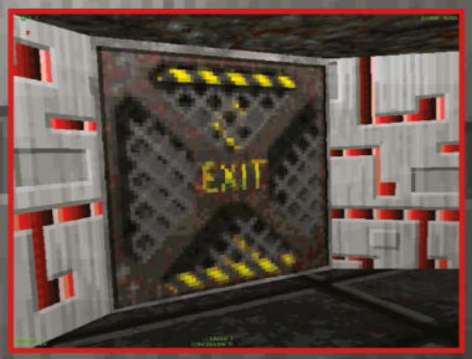
Immediately afterwards, the two founders of Parallax Software went their separate ways: Mike founded Volition Software, while Matt went independent with Outrage Entertainment, which led to interesting new game series such as *Red Faction*, *Freespace* and *Saints Row*. Outrage also developed *Descent*^{3} (1999), which wasn't as successful as its two predecessors.

However, it was more successful than *Descent To Undermountain*, developed at Interplay and released in spring 1998. This was not a shooter, but an action-based RPG in the *D&D* universe, using the *Descent* engine for its graphics. An interesting idea, but unfortunately the game was riddled with bugs and a major sales bomb.

And then there were three official *Descent* books, all written by Peter Telep, all from 1999, and all rather bland. But they're OK to read without leaving too deep a scar on the brain, which makes them almost recommendable compared to other videogame literature.



[PC] The enemies have deathly precise aim, follow you mercilessly and always outnumber you.



[PC] The exit is the most important door in each level. You have to find it before you destroy the level boss!

> "THERE WERE TWO BIG CHALLENGES: TEXTURE MAPPING AND 3D WORLD GEOMETRY"
> MATT TOSCHLOG

Descent has 30 levels in total, 27 regular ones and 3 secret levels that can be reached through hidden exit doors (which can be found in levels 10, 21 and 24). At the beginning, their structure is very straightforward, with few and fairly obviously connected rooms. However, quite quickly the complexity of the mines increases exponentially, with many rooms located above, below and next to each other, sometimes connected by several tunnels on different levels. *Descent* takes the term '3D shooter' very literally, and demands far more of the player's 3D spatial awareness than any other comparable game of the time. There is some minimal support in the form of a 3D wireframe automap, that can be displayed at any time to facilitate orientation – but unfortunately its spiderweb-like structure is not of much help.

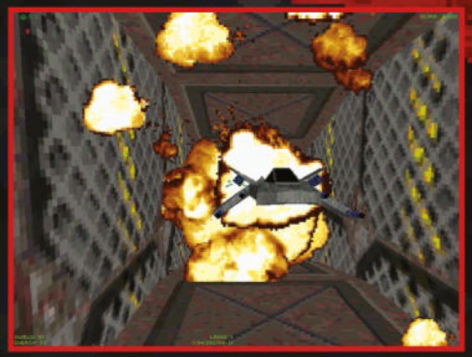
***Descent* was based on a 32-bit 3D engine developed entirely in-house, which was fully geared towards 486 processors, which meant that even in VGA resolution the game was very power-hungry.** In February 1996, patch 1.5 was released, that added SVGA resolutions with up to 640x480 pixels. The developers themselves advised against using this though, warning in the patch's readme file, "Super-killer high res. Most CPUs manufactured today cannot run this at a good framerate. Requires a VESA driver and a fondness for slide-shows."

The enemies you encounter in these slideshows are all robots, which is mainly for technical reasons. The team wanted them to be textured polygon objects, which meant that due to the low computing power of average gaming computers at the time, they had to be built very simplistic. This ruled out complex human bodies as enemies – but with abstract mechanical beings, it didn't matter that they only consisted of a handful of polygons each. This decision was made after first experimenting with a sprite-based 3D system in the vein of *Wing Commander*, which according to Matt, looked awful in motion and wasted huge amounts of memory.

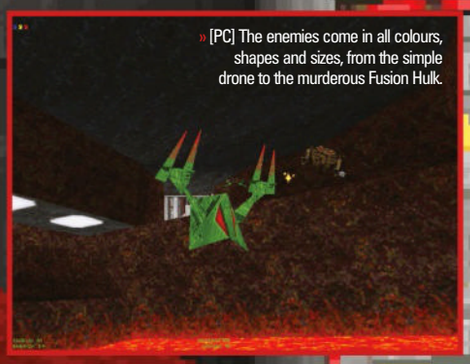
Alongside *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Descent* is one of the founding fathers of motion sickness in computer games. This is not only due to the confusing 3D orientation in space, which takes some getting used to, but also to little things like the wobbly movement of the ship itself. According to Matt, the developers simply accepted this, "We knew it was a problem for some people. We on the development team got used to it and didn't have problems, but I do remember that if we made some minor change to how the ship moved I'd feel a little queasy for a day or two until I got used to it." It even gives a warning on the packaging that you'd better have a stable stomach, "Hang on to your senses (and your lunch)."

Nevertheless, *Descent* sold extremely well, which according to Matt was not only due to great reviews, but also to very successful deals with graphics card manufacturers that bundled the game, "*Descent* was new and cutting edge, which made it a good match for hardware makers who were looking for a game to bundle. And our publisher Interplay had an awesome sublicensing group, run by the incomparable Jill Goldworn, that excelled at making those deals."

There were even special versions for VR systems at the time, such as the VFX-1 from



[PC] If you reach the exit within the time limit, the escape from the tunnel is shown as an automatically running real-time cutscene with lots of explosions.



» [PC] The enemies come in all colours, shapes and sizes, from the simple drone to the murderous Fusion Hulk.

» [PC] The fact that you only fight against simply shaped robots is due to technical reasons – detailed enemy models would have cost too much CPU power.

» [PC] The 3D automap is a nice idea, but offers very little clarity.

» [PC] If you fly through such glowing energy fields, the on-board systems of the Syssyx are recharged.

Forte or the Cybermaxx from Victormaxx, which made for an… interesting experience, according to Matt, "The VR goggles back then were clunky, but it was still pretty cool. And I definitely did get nauseated when using the goggles."

This was followed by a PlayStation conversion, two sequels and various spin-offs – more on this in the Where No One Descended Before panel. The name *Descent* disappeared for a while after the third game and only resurfaced in 2015 when a reboot of the series called *Descent: Underground* was announced, which still dwells in development limbo. The original *Descent* team had nothing to do with this, as they were busy with their own reboot at the same time, as Matt confirms, "Mike and I had been talking for years about doing a spiritual successor to *Descent*, and finally things just came together. Mike was retired from Volition and I had left my job and was looking for something to do. And, crucially, design wunderkind Luke Schneider was available and interested. The *Descent* name is owned by Interplay and we weren't able to come to terms with them on licensing it for the new game. Maybe we should have – there are a lot of *Descent* fans who have never heard of *Overload*." We agree with Matt about pushing for the licence because *Overload* is exactly what you would imagine a modern *Descent* to be and is great fun.

If you want to play the original, you can still do so very easily via Steam or GOG. Or you can use *DXX Rebirth*, which is based on the game's source code (officially released in early 1998), and makes *Descent 1* and *2* playable on modern systems with many bells and whistles. In terms of content, the original game is still just as much of a wild roller-coaster ride as its level design: exciting, frustrating and motivating. A true 3D classic that Matt still holds very close to his heart, "I still think it's pretty neat. *Descent* is special to me and I can't judge it objectively. I am pleased and humbled by how many people tell me that they loved the game back in the day."

THE SHAREWARE CONNECTION

HOW DESCENT ALMOST BECAME AN APOGEE GAME

Descent was originally going to be released through Apogee, as Matt tells us, "We signed with Apogee shortly after id Software had parted ways with them. Apogee, I think, was looking for something to fill that hole and they signed up *Descent*." Scott Miller, founder of Apogee, confirms this, "They sent us a very early demo. George Broussard and I loved what we saw so we flew Matt and Mike in and spent the day with them, including going to see the movie *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* and visiting id Software. By the end of the trip we agreed to do a publishing deal with them. I think we were funding them at $18,000 a month, which was far higher than any of our other projects at the time, but that's how much we believed in their game. After I think a full year of Apogee funding *Descent*, they realised that they needed an even higher level of funding to hire more people, which we couldn't afford. So instead I proposed the idea of them taking the game to a bigger publisher. And they quickly made a deal with Interplay."

However, Matt has slightly different memories of this time, "After a few months they figured out that we weren't making *Doom* and cancelled the project. We didn't have a hostile split with Apogee and, due to contractual obligations, continued to interact with them at a low level. We were disappointed that they dropped the game, but we weren't angry. They made the best decision for themselves and they honoured their obligations."

» The original version of *Descent* (still called *Miner* then) that was proposed to Apogee.

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **System:** PS4, PS5, Xbox One, PC, iOS, macOS, Nintendo Switch
- **Year:** 2019
- **Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive
- **Developer:** Simogo
- **Key People:** Simon Flesser (director), Magnus 'Gordon' Gardebäck (programmer), Daniel Olsén and Jonathan Eng (composers)

Go Deeper

- *Sayonara*'s inspirations were *The World Ender* by Lord Huron, *WarioWare*, *Rez*, anime, Fifties Teddy Girls subculture and café racer motorcycles.
- Early builds involved being sucked into different media. Begin Again took place in a movie while Mine took place in a storybook castle.

» [PlayStation 4] The game is full of references to retro arcade games, such as this *OutRun 2*-inspired segment.

» [PlayStation 4] Here we can clearly see the influence of games like *Rez* or *Panzer Dragoon*.

***Sayonara Wild Hearts'* innovative rhythm-driven mechanics merge arcade action, a stunning soundtrack and a neon-drenched aesthetic. With director Simon Flesser, we explore the elements that make this recent gem a Future Classic**

Words by James Tocchio

SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

THE BACKGROUND

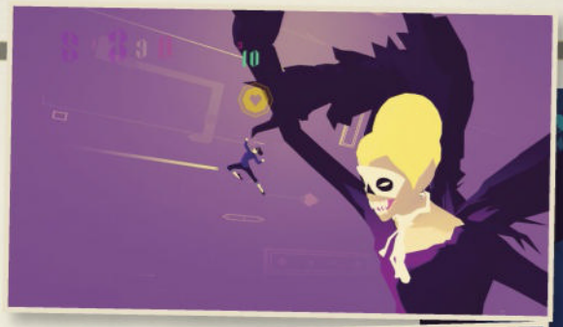
The colloquialism 'stopped me dead in my tracks' is almost always used metaphorically. We say it to mean we've been emotionally stunned or surprised by something strange or awesome. But when we say that *Sayonara Wild Hearts* stopped us in our tracks, we mean it quite literally.

We were walking the show floor of PAX East, one of the largest gaming conventions in North America, searching for something we'd never seen before. We passed by countless 2D Metroidvanias, the brilliant primary colours of the *Pokémon* showcase, the nondescript rash of Soulslikes and the seemingly endless stream of roguelikes. Plenty of games worth playing, but none that we'd describe as totally new.

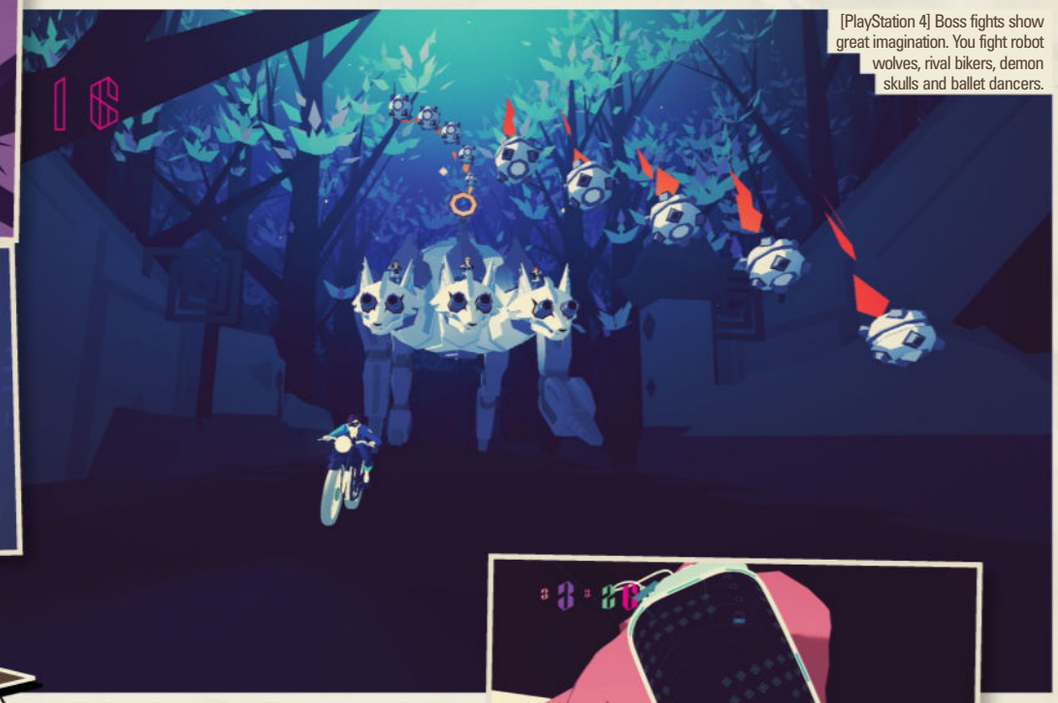
That's when we saw the hyper-coloured synth-pop thousand-mile-per-hour gift to the senses called *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. An evolved super-specimen lifted steaming from the hot pink primordial ooze of the greatest arcade games ever made, inside was the DNA of the hard leaning motorcycles of *Super Hang-On*, the trance-inducing rhythmic action of *Rez*, and the barely controlled drifting of *OutRun 2*, all bathed in neon floodlights and synced to the most effervescent and eclectic soundtrack we'd ever heard. We couldn't look away, much less take a step. *Sayonara Wild Hearts* had stopped us dead in our tracks.

THE GAME

Sayonara Wild Heart's plot is light yet earnest, a story of healing and self-discovery. A modern-day nameless heroine suffers a violent heartbreak before being drawn into a surreal parallel universe overseen by three divine arcana of the Tarot. The harmony of this place has been stolen by a fiendish personified arcanum and her allies. To restore harmony, she



» [PlayStation 4] Many stages involve high-speed motorcycle runs, á la Yu Suzuki's *Super Hang-On*.



[PlayStation 4] Boss fights show great imagination. You fight robot wolves, rival bikers, demon skulls and ballet dancers.

Things of note

MOTORCYCLE PARADOX

Despite designing one of gaming's most exhilarating motorcycle racing mechanics, Simon told us he personally dislikes driving and doesn't own a bike.

TWO FOOLS

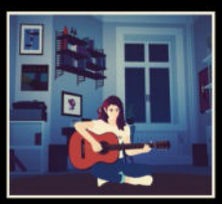
A scrapped level had players control two versions of the Fool simultaneously. Though cut, ideas from this stage are used late in the game.

BEAUTY IN EVERY FRAME

Very few games (or any media, really) are as visually arresting as *Sayonara Wild Hearts*. It's a treat when every screenshot is a work of art.

ALBUM ARCADE MODE

Finish the game and you unlock Album Arcade Mode, in which you play the full, uninterrupted pop album, every level in a single unbroken chain.



FINAL MEDLEY

Sayonara's final level is a heart-pounding megamix of previous battles stitched into one ever-escalating track. It's an audiovisual crescendo and a pure spectacle.

must become the Fool, mend her own broken heart, and destroy the cursed arcanum.

"I grew up with witches, so I've always had tarots around me and find them fascinating," Simon Flesser, *Sayonara*'s director tells us. "They're meaningful for themes but also come with a lot of free visual ideas. To me, *SWH* is a broad allegory about new beginnings and dealing with the past and the future. I think players should interpret [the story] however they see fit."

But if the story is nebulous, the gameplay is not. Varied yet refined, it's a racing game, a rhythm game, a bullet hell, a rail shooter and more, played over a pop album in which gameplay is divided into individual songs and stages, each with its own distinct mechanics, and each played in perfect synchronisation with the music.

The player generally travels through pre-animated stages as in games like *Hang-On* or *Star Fox*, except the mechanics of each stage change constantly. In one, you may be racing through city streets on a motorcycle, avoiding obstacles and collecting hearts and fighting enemies with rhythmic button mashing, and in another you might be skateboarding down a cosmic glass highway, or bouncing atop mushrooms on a polygonal stag, or hacking a VR headset from the inside.

What unifies everything, beyond the stellar aesthetic, is the clarity of control. "Each stage is supposed to feel like one long custom animation that always syncs to the beat," says Simon. "*Sayonara Wild Hearts* was designed with only one input, so it could be picked up by people who have never touched a game before."

When you hit an obstacle or miss a beat or otherwise flub things up, the stage doesn't reset or kill the vibe. Instead, the animation on the screen and the music itself rewinds back to a recent beat in real-time. This hard-to-program mechanic keeps the action moving and the music flowing. "We can scrub the entire timeline, frame by frame," says Simon. "It was a big challenge to make, and not how you traditionally think about games, but it was needed for everything to sync up perfectly to the music."

And that's the final piece of the puzzle: the music. Early builds experimented with a pulpier surfer-rock and acoustic soundtrack before a play test with Chvrches and Carly Rae Jepsen playing in the background inspired the electro-pop soundtrack of the finished game.

"The very same day I contacted Jonathan [Eng] and asked if he could do a test to write an energetic pop song," says Simon of the game's musical score. "[After that] it was very much a back and forth between me and Daniel Olsén. I'd have impossible requests like for Inside where we had to make the ending longer so we could fit the entire last bit with the Death monster. It's still hard to believe how Daniel was able to weave together all those songs in the way he did."

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

More than five years after it was released, *Sayonara Wild Hearts* is still something special. Though it makes many references to games of the past and borrows core concepts from some of the greatest arcade games of all time, the sum of these parts manages to be utterly unique.

Its seamless fusion of gameplay, music and narrative easily make a compelling argument for the 'games as art' crowd. More important than that, it's fun! With a precise run time, a beautifully told story, its impossibly cool soundtrack and its stellar gameplay, there's no other word for it. *Sayonara Wild Hearts* is perfect. ✱

THE HISTORY OF JAK AND DAXTER

AFTER HELPING TO DEFINE PLAYSTATION GAMING WITH CRASH BANDICOOT, NAUGHTY DOG PERFORMED THE SAME FEAT ON THE PS2 WITH JAK AND DAXTER BEFORE TRUSTING THE DUO TO OTHER STUDIOS. FORMER NAUGHTY DOG DESIGNER/WRITER DAN AREY LOOKS BACK AT THE POPULAR SERIES

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

» [PlayStation 2] Filling up on Blue Eco in *The Precursor Legacy* gives Jak temporary abilities such as speed boosts.

» [PlayStation 2] Jak doesn't have any weapons in *The Precursor Legacy*, but he can pull off a mean spin kick.

Nobody could have blamed Naughty Dog if it had continued to make *Crash Bandicoot* games after the Nineties came to an end. After all, its four *Crash* PlayStation titles had sold in their millions and Crash was arguably the console's unofficial mascot. But as the PS2 was launched in 2000, the studio was working on something different for the new console. Rather than a solo hero it created a pair of protagonists, in the form of precocious teenagers Jak and Daxter. Then instead of depicting these young heroes' world as one defined by good versus evil, like Crash Bandicoot's, Naughty Dog opted to create an environment that was shaped by mysterious, ancient beings called Precursors.

Just as important as the place they called home was that Jak and Daxter should have depth of character and believable reasons for their actions, as the writer/designer of their debut title Dan Arey explains. "I wanted Jak to have a purpose that wasn't just rescuing a princess or collecting coins, and then Daxter was our wonderful sidekick – he made everything a counterpoint or hilarious," Dan notes. "We had started with this idea of a rich, beautiful world with some strange mystery behind it, and that was what the Precursors became. If you went to their island you found Dark Eco, which was energy with very special properties. We were telling you not to go to that island because there was Dark Eco there. Of course Jak, being a rebellious teenager, does just that, and then his best friend Daxter falls into this vat of Eco and becomes an Ottsel – a part otter/part weasel!"

» Dan Arey worked on all six *Jak And Daxter* games; he's now the CCO/creative director at Nerd Ninjas.

Jak And Daxter's world required the talents of Naughty Dog's storytellers just as much as its level designers and artists so that its plot, gameplay and aesthetics had equal appeal. The studio could have considered these distinct disciplines separately, but instead it looked to how it could weave them together to form a greater whole, as Dan points out. "As the writer, as well as the game designer, I wanted to tell a story that had mystery and suspense," Dan reasons. "A term we used was 'Narrative as reward', which is that the narrative itself was part of the joy of the game. This was a world that had to be explored, and you were

» [PlayStation 2] As bosses go, *The Precursor Legacy*'s flower-headed mayor and his minions are no pushovers.

going to have to figure out what Eco was and who the Precursors were. Then because we were an art-centric studio there was a constant push to find out what the most beautiful thing was that we could pull off on the PlayStation 2."

> "WE HAD INVESTED PRETTY HEAVILY IN CRASH'S UNIVERSE, AND SO WE DECIDED TO DO THE SAME THING WITH JAK AND DAXTER"
> **DAN AREY**

In order to make Jak and Daxter's first outing – *The Precursor Legacy* – as immersive as possible, an open-world mission-based structure was favoured over a hub world and spoke system like the *Crash Bandicoot* games had used. This structure revolved around beautifully rendered non-player characters that Jak and Daxter would meet on their adventure. Their interactions played out in cutscenes that took inspiration from the very best animated movies rather than from anything seen in earlier games. "We had invested pretty heavily in *Crash*'s universe, and so we decided to do the same thing with *Jak And Daxter*," Dan comments. "We knew we wanted to go full open world at this point, or at least reasonably open, and we were hitting the PlayStation 2 where there could be more of that. We knew that we could go to the next level. So we basically made the villagers in *The Precursor Legacy* the 'keys' to the next place to visit. Back in those days nobody was expecting Pixar-level authenticity, but that was what we were gunning for."

Equal attention was being paid to *The Precursor Legacy*'s gameplay as to its character designs. More specifically, three main collectables were devised: Eco of different colours, which gave Jak powers and affected inanimate objects; Precursor Orbs, which acted as the game's currency; and Power Cells, which were often the reward for completing missions. "We wanted to have some very specific resources in the game, and we wanted to separate their uses," Dan observes. "Players typically went in the right direction if you did the right thing with them, and we used collectables a lot for that. You thought you were making a choice, but we were helping you along with collectables that led you in that direction. We also had natural barriers so that you didn't feel like you were coming to a stop because of an invisible wall. That was why that first level was on the ocean, so that there was a natural break there."

» [PlayStation 2] There's no hub world in *The Precursor Legacy*, instead you get missions from non-player characters.

» [PlayStation 2] Unlike *The Precursor Legacy*, contact with Dark Eco in *Jak II* allows Jak to adopt a powerful dark form.

» [PlayStation 2] Jak gets a Morph Gun in *Jak II* that he can modify. The Scatter Gun mod sends enemies flying.

The glowing reviews and millions of sales accrued by *Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy* clearly validated the approach its designers had taken. Its stunning visuals and seamlessly open world were singled out as setting new standards, and as soon as it had shipped, work on a sequel called *Jak II* commenced. As Dan recollects, Jak was given an upgradeable weapon in the follow-up rather than relying on unarmed combat. "The Morph Gun was really about what we did to introduce something that you were able to modify and change, but with it still being the same thing that you were comfortable with," Dan remembers. "We gave it different capabilities that used different variations of Eco, so the Eco fed right into that. The four Eco types were very specific, and we wanted to make sure that we leaned into that concept. So the Morph Gun was a central system of using Eco with colour coding. It was also the idea that each mod was its own unique play experience."

The sprawling metropolis that was created for *Jak II* was equally unique. Haven City's streets were crowded with people and its skies were full of gravity-defying Zoomer

» [PlayStation 2] If you're low on ammo in *Jak II* you have the option of using Jak's Morph Gun as a makeshift club.

KEY PLAYERS

CORE CHARACTERS FROM THE JAK AND DAXTER SERIES

JAK

The journey Jak takes through the series is one of empowerment, but the dark and light abilities he acquires take their toll. The fresh-faced teenager seen in *The Precursor Legacy* is a haunted soul in *Jak II*, but he's older and wiser by *Jak 3*.

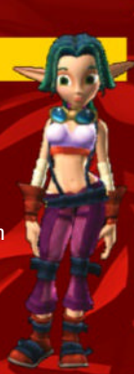
DAXTER

Originally the comedian to Jak's sullen teenager in *The Precursor Legacy*, the part otter/part weasel Daxter was popular enough to be made playable in parts of *Jak II* and *Jak 3*. He's a racer in *Jak X*, and he shines in his solo title for the PSP.

SAMOS

A father figure and mentor to both Jak and Daxter in the original game, Samos is the Green Sage of their world and a freedom fighter. In *Jak II*, he sends a childhood Jak back to the past so that his younger self can raise him to be a hero.

KEIRA



She's the daughter of Samus and Jak's girlfriend, but far more importantly, Keira is a genius-level inventor and mechanic. She even runs a race team in *Jak X*. In *Lost Frontier*, she follows in her father's footsteps by becoming an Eco Sage.

craft. A radar-like system recommended where players could go next, but the city's open world allowed them full autonomy and freedom of movement. As Dan concedes, giving players this much choice gave the game's designers considerable challenges. "*Jak II*'s open-world city was really complicated," Dan acknowledges. "It pushed every limit of the PlayStation 2 at the time. We had to design it multiple times because we had so much draw distance and so many polygons that we were having real trouble. We had to give it more of a zigzag layout, so the city streets were maze-like. We also tried to build a story like that. We wanted to have a space where you could go and meet people. It was so that it felt like a real place, within the limitations of the PlayStation 2 of course."

Efforts were also made to make *Jak II*'s titular protagonist seem like a real person, albeit one that lived in a world of mysterious forces. Experiments with these forces pre-game left Jak able to take on a dark and powerful form by claiming Eco from fallen foes. Naughty Dog then used the toll this took and the passing of time to shape its leading man. "We always knew that we were going to explore Dark Eco further, so that was one of the reasons we played with that. It was all about exploring

> "JAK II'S OPEN-WORLD CITY WAS REALLY COMPLICATED. IT PUSHED EVERY LIMIT OF THE PLAYSTATION 2 AT THE TIME"
> DAN AREY

good and bad," Dan considers. "We were also one of the first studios to age our hero. We wanted to have Jak evolve, and for him to become this forever changed hero. So he got exposed to Dark Eco, and had to overcome the problems of that. We were also giving you a sense that there was real depth to this character because of his experiences, and that those experiences weren't always good."

Judging by the praise showered on *Jak II*, and the vast numbers of copies it sold, it's fair to say that Jak's character development went down well. Work on a third *Jak* title – *Jak 3* – began soon after *Jak II*'s release, with its desert environment, the Wasteland, playing a key part in its design. The Wasteland also fed into ideas that Dan had for taking Jak's story forward. "We had this idea that there was this city out in the middle of the Wasteland," Dan ponders. "We knew we were going to do a lot of open-world driving, and we also wanted to have the story continue to evolve with Jak and the search for his identity. The thing about it was we needed a place for him to go, because he knew he didn't fit in. We wanted the Wasteland to look weathered and old. It told so much story just with that look, and it also made it different from other locations in Jak's world."

Building on the introduction of the Morph Gun in *Jak II*, *Jak 3* featured new gun mods including one that radiated a destructive wave around the spot where

» [PlayStation 2] Getting around *Jak II*'s Haven City is a lot quicker if you fly around in a gravity-defying Zoomer.

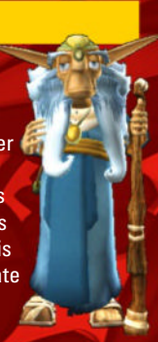
TORN

A leader of the underground resistance in *Jak II* and the head of an army fighting a war in *Jak 3*, Torn initially distrusts Jak and Daxter but grows to respect them after they go on missions for him. He later races against the pair in *Jak X*.

ASHELIN

After spying for Torn in *Jak II*, the daughter of Haven City's governor succeeds her father and forms a new army in *Jak 3*. Ashelin is instrumental in keeping Jak alive when he gets banished to the Wasteland. She's also a competitor in *Jak X*.

KOR



When he first appears in *Jak II*, Kor seems to be a kind old man who's looking after a very young Jak. It's later revealed that he's a robot that only wants the child because of his unique ability to activate the all-powerful Precursor Egg.

KREW

This humongous crime boss recruits Jak as a gun for hire in *Jak II*, and in the process arms him with evermore destructive gun mods. Before they fall out, Krew's missions require Jak to find artefacts and weapons outside Haven City's walls.

» [PlayStation 2] The deserts of the Wasteland are introduced in *Jak 3*, where one of your missions is a buggy race.

» [PlayStation 2] Explosive weapons such as the Wave Concussor Morph Gun mod are a useful feature introduced in *Jak 3*.

» [PlayStation 2] *Jak 3* is the first game in the series where you regularly play as Jak's diminutive sidekick Daxter.

▶ Jak was standing. Dan considers this to be a more powerful version of the spinning kick that the hero had used ever since his debut in *The Precursor Legacy*, in that the two attacks achieved similar effects, albeit on different scales. "Evan Wells and myself designed most of the weapons in *Jak 3*," Dan reflects. "Part of that was just what we had learned about 3D design; that 'area of effect' was your best friend, especially in a radius sense. You really needed to clear space around you, and you did that by using the Wave Concussor, but it was true even with the basic spin. It was all about controlling the space around you. In the worst case scenario you at least had to *empty* the space around you, and that was always something we wanted the player to feel empowered to do."

> "JAK X GAVE ME A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO KEEP TELLING THE STORY. WE HAD A ROAD WARRIOR FEEL IN JAK 3, SO I THOUGHT WHY NOT CONTINUE WITH THAT?"
> **DAN AREY**

More empowerment came in the form of a third identity for Jak that gave him defensive and other non-violent abilities by drawing power from Light Eco. Arguably the most exciting of these allowed him to slow down time for his enemies while he continued to move at his normal speed, as Dan explains. "We wanted to give you this idea of time manipulation and flying and a protection shield," Dan enthuses. "We had seen how Insomniac had done *Spyro*, where you could leap and then glide, and I thought flying in *Jak 3* would be fun. But Light Jak was really because we had Dark Jak before, so of course we had to have Light Jak. It let us ask what Light Eco was, and what were its special properties? So it was flying, protection and time manipulation. Time manipulation can be so powerful if you do it right, and we got to play around with that stuff."

In keeping with its predecessors, *Jak 3* received plaudits from critics and players alike. In keeping with Naughty Dog's *Crash Bandicoot* trilogy, the third Jak platformer was followed by a racing game. *Jak X* retained the Wasteland from *Jak 3* and built on the earlier game's driving challenges, it also channelled *Mad Max*, which was known as *The Road Warrior* in the US. "*Jak X* gave me a wonderful opportunity to keep telling the story," Dan beams. "We had a *Road Warrior* feel in *Jak 3*, so I thought why not continue with that? We also had a proof of concept for *Jak X* already thanks to the driving sections in *Jak 3*. Any time we had a proof of concept that would give us a leg up for the next game we would use it. Also, we had already done *Crash Team Racing*, and it was very successful, so we thought we would have fun with Jak and get him out racing in the Wasteland."

One of the many differences between *Jak X* and *Crash Team Racing* was their approach to meters. Rather than a speed

COOL CAMEOS

NOTABLE GUEST APPEARANCES BY JAK AND DAXTER

EVERYBODY'S GOLF 4

■ An action hero in a golf game is practically duty bound to play for laughs, and that's exactly what Jak does in *Everybody's Golf 4*. His celebrations include jumping uppercuts and ground pounds followed by perfectly delivered deadpan gags.

RATCHET: DEADLOCKED

■ As a change of pace, the fourth title in the *Ratchet & Clank* series is a third-person shooter rather than a platformer with shooting and other gameplay involved. *Deadlocked* lets you play as Jak in its co-op mode if you get 50 Glamour Stars.

PAIN

■ Given that *Pain* involves damaging ragdoll characters by slingshotting them into harm's way, it follows that Daxter is featured. Humiliation and suffering are often amusingly heaped on the tiny Ottsel, so he's the perfect candidate for *Pain*.

boost meter that filled based on the time your vehicle spent in the air, *Jak X*'s Dark Eco meter filled as your car took or received damage, with the reward being a boost to your weapons. "We had used Hang Time in *Crash Team Racing*, where the more air you got the more speed boost you got," Dan remarks. "So for *Jak X* it was just about how we could be different again. It was trying to be unique in the sense that it wasn't a speed boost meter. It was like an early version of a rage meter, because the more damage you took the more retribution you could give, so you could dump your frustration onto a competitor. I think that's always a fun way to soften some of the pain in a game."

Novel features such as the Dark Eco meter and the sheer challenge offered by *Jak X* were recognised by reviewers when the game came out, as were its many modes and rich narrative. A year later, Jak's wise-cracking sidekick Daxter received a solo PSP title produced by Ready At Dawn rather than Naughty Dog. Knowing how popular Daxter was, and having a high opinion of the character and the actor who voiced him, Dan was more than happy to be involved in this latest project's development. "Daxter was a hugely successful character, he had become such a fan favourite!" Dan exclaims. "We would go to conventions and stuff, and Daxter would be all people would talk about. He was voiced by Max Casella. I did a lot of work trying to find the right person for

» [PlayStation 2] The combat in *Jak X* is essential to winning and there's an impressive selection of weapons on offer.

» [PlayStation 2] Rather than drifting to get speed boosts in *Jak X* you collect Power Cells that fill a Turbo Meter.

REMASTERING JAK

THE HD VERSIONS, UPSCALED RELEASES AND COLLECTOR'S EDITIONS

There are a few options for experiencing the *Jak And Daxter* titles other than playing the originals on the hardware they were designed for. There's the *Jak And Daxter Collection*, which was released on the PlayStation Store in 2012 by Mass Media Games and also received a physical release. It's a set of remastered HD ports of the first three PS2 games that was produced for the PS3 and Vita. The PS3 version has a stereoscopic mode that supports 3D TVs, and both releases have extra features once you log into the PlayStation Network, such as a trophy system. If you prefer physical releases, the first four games were made available on disk by Limited Run Games for the PS4 in both standard and collector's editions, albeit these were the PS2 originals in upscaled form. The collector editions include all manner of *Jak And Daxter* memorabilia, such as trading cards and hardback books. Both these and the standard versions have sold out now, but second-hand copies are your best bet if you absolutely have to have discs. Otherwise, all six *Jak And Daxter* titles are playable on the PS5 as of 2024. Again, these are upscaled versions of the originals rather than remastered HD remakes.

LITTLEBIGPLANET

Are tough guys Jak and Daxter suitable subjects for Sackboy costumes? Media Molecule certainly thought so, so much so that it made charming woolly outfits based on the pair for *LittleBigPlanet*, *LittleBigPlanet 2* and *LittleBigPlanet Karting*.

PLAYSTATION MOVE HEROES

This novel title features not only Jak and Daxter but also fellow platforming partners Ratchet and Clank plus Sly Cooper and Bentley. Your goal is to protect cute aliens in a series of minigames that are designed around the PlayStation Move.

PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE

Another Sony franchise crossover featuring Jak and Daxter, *Battle Royale* is a platform fighter with 15 battle arenas. These are inspired by the featured franchises, with one of them being based on Sandover Village from *The Precursor Legacy*.

» [PSP] In *Daxter*, Jak's humorous and easily annoyed friend grudgingly takes a job as a bug exterminator.

» [PSP] Stealth challenges are common in Daxter's solo outing, which suits his natural agility perfectly.

» [PSP] Spraying weeds against the clock in *Daxter* brings to mind *Crash Bandicoot 3*'s jet-ski challenge.

UNRELEASED JAK

CANCELLED JAK AND DAXTER GAMES AND THE PAIR'S RUMOURED MOVIE

■ Naughty Dog started work on a solo *Jak* title for the PSP after *Jak X* was released in 2005. After preliminary designs were drawn-up, a tech demo was produced that allowed players to design and build airships to take into battle. However, it fell by the wayside when the studio decided it didn't have the resources to continue development of both it and *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* at the same time. Some years later, before the development of 2013's *The Last Of Us*, the developer created concept art for a reboot of the series where an emphasis was placed on giving Jak and Daxter a more realistic look. This project was ultimately abandoned, although the concept art was revealed in a book published in 2014 called *The Art Of Naughty Dog*. When Limited Run Games released its PS4 versions of the first four *Jak And Daxter* titles in 2019 it gave players who bought all of them a mocked-up case for the cancelled reboot, giving it the name *Jak IV*. Then in 2022, a movie adaptation of *Jak And Daxter* was rumoured to be in development. To date nothing official has been announced, but given the success of *Uncharted* on the big screen and the popularity of *The Last Of Us* TV show it could just be a matter of time.

Jak IV scan courtesy of jakanddaxterarchive.home.blog

▶ that job. I would write jokes and then Max would come in, and we would just let him run free. So we knew Daxter was important and decided to do something with him, and why not do it for the PSP? Because it was an amazing 'anywhere' gaming platform."

> "WE LOVED THE IDEA OF A PUFFED-UP MEGA DAXTER, WHERE FOR ONCE HE GETS WHAT HE WANTS, WHICH IS TO BE BADDER AND TOUGHER" DAN AREY

In order to ramp up the comedy value of Daxter's titular PSP outing, the short-tempered hero was given an occupation where he would constantly feel ridiculed. It was also a role that got players using all manner of fun-to-use equipment and vehicles. "We were thinking since he *bugged* people that it would be funny if he was a bug exterminator!" Dan jokes. "But it was really just down to a brainstorm at Ready At Dawn, we were just having fun. Everything about Daxter was the economy of him being bigger than life and the silly little things he was. So we made him crawl through tight spaces, and that was indignant for him. That was what we wanted, for him to be constantly complaining about whatever he had to do! It also gave the player gadgets, and gadgets make for a good game."

This assessment was agreed with by critics, many of whom scored Daxter's PSP adventure near-perfect marks. Three years later, the *Jak And Daxter* series continued with *The Lost Frontier* by High Impact Games, which Dan also worked on. One of his lingering memories is of Daxter being given a dark, monstrous alter ego that was inspired by a classic animated short. "There's a Warner Brothers cartoon with a little chicken that turns into a monster, like Jekyll and Hyde. That was the concept behind Dark Daxter," Dan reveals. "We loved the idea of a puffed-up mega Daxter, where for once he gets what he wants, which is to be badder and tougher. Of

» [PlayStation 2] The bosses in *Lost Frontier* can be tough, and its saw-wielding robot isn't a mayor to mess with.

» [PlayStation 2] Jak gets powerful Eco Powers in *Lost Frontier*, such as the guidable and explosive Eco Amplifier.

» [PlayStation 2] Flight combat against Sky Pirates is an exciting new aspect of the sixth Jak title *Lost Frontier*.

course, Dark Daxter had to happen after we had Dark Jak and Light Jak. His attacks were designed to change the player's response. For the Frenzy Attack we had this idea of store and release, which is a really powerful way to make the human mind respond to something."

Aside from Daxter Hulking-out, *Lost Frontier* took the idea of piloting gliders and Zoomers from the earlier games, as well as vehicle challenges from the *Crash Bandicoot* series, and rolled them all into flight combat challenges. These pitted Jak and Daxter against Sky Pirates in a part of Jak's world that players had never seen before. Similarly to Dark Daxter, this aspect of the game took influence from classic animations, but it was also informed by an earlier Naughty Dog title. "Going all the way back to *Crash Bandicoot* we had flying in that," Dan reminisces. "The idea of Jak and Daxter being in the skies and being further out in their world was also really beautiful, and Sky Pirates were just a cool idea. I just love that kind of world, whether it's Miyazaki's animations or whatever. I just love anachronistic *cool* flight. So it was a beautiful theme, and we wanted to go with something powerful and new."

Although it was well received when it launched, *Lost Frontier* marked the end of the series, although remastered PS3 versions of the original trilogy and emulation-based PS4 versions of the first four titles followed.

When considering the *Jak And Daxter* games now, Dan cites a convergence of talent and tech for their enduring popularity, and notes their designers' desire to engage the emotions of those that played them. "I still miss the *Jak And Daxter* world to this day, because I think that it was just so rich," Dan laments. "I loved those days. It was a beautiful time where technology and creativity meshed so well. I really do rate the gameplay in the series, especially the dynamic difficulty adjustments. We wanted people to win and we wanted them to enjoy themselves. Even when they died we wanted it to be funny! We wanted them to feel something special was happening, no matter what, so that they had an emotional reason to be playing every level."

DEAD SPACE

SETTING THE STANDARD FOR MODERN SURVIVAL HORROR GAMES IN 2008, THE FIRST DEAD SPACE ENTRY WALKED SO THAT SPIRITUAL SUCCESSORS LIKE ALIEN: ISOLATION COULD RUN. WE SPEAK TO COMPOSER JASON GRAVES AND LEARN HOW HIS TENSE, ANXIOUS SCORE CRAFTED THE PERFECT ATMOSPHERE OF STRESS AND FEAR

WORDS BY LIAM HEITMANN-RYCE-LEMERCIER

IN THE KNOW

- **» SYSTEM:** XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 3, PC
- **» COMPOSER:** JASON GRAVES
- **» DEVELOPER:** EA REDWOOD SHORES
- **» RELEASE:** 2008
- **» BEST TRACK:** I'VE GOT YOU DEVOLVING UNDER MY SKIN

Jason Graves has a solo composer credit for the first two *Dead Space* titles, but collaborated with co-composer James Hannigan on *Dead Space 3*. More recently, he has scored multiple entries in survival horror series *The Dark Pictures Anthology* with longtime developer partner Supermassive Games.

A prolific composer for film, television and videogames, Jason Graves has always had a streak of horror coursing through his musical output. Following in the footsteps of genre legends Christopher Young and Jerry Goldsmith – think *Hellraiser*, *Copycat*, *Alien* and *The Omen* – Graves' studies in composition came from beneath a dark, deadly shadow.

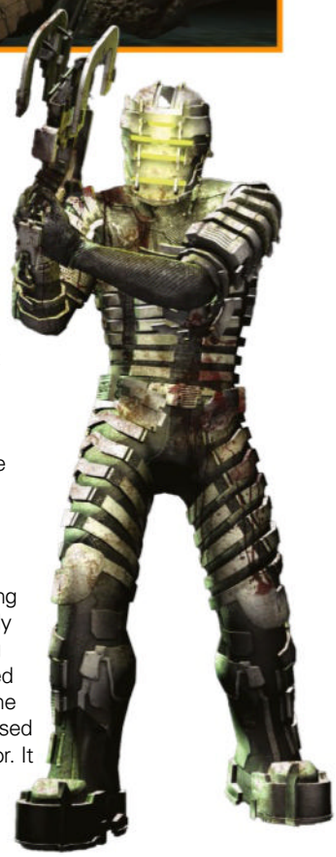
The series for which he is perhaps best known today is the grisly, violently atmospheric – and oftentimes strangely beautiful – survival horror series *Dead Space*. Following embattled protagonist, the resourceful engineer Isaac Clarke, the player frequently fights off against grotesquely reanimated humans in the form of deadly Necromorphs, brought back to life by a mysterious extraterrestrial artefact known as the Marker.

The environments of each *Dead Space* game are often dark, dank and deserted, leaving ample room for the music to put your nerves on edge as your imagination wanders into very grim terrain. In the development process of the series' first entry, Jason was invited to join the team at Electronic Arts after his demo tracks were, according to audio director Don Veca, exactly what they were looking for. "He gave me complete creative freedom with the music," Jason tells us. "We had a small live budget and a final deadline. I was free to use that time and money any way I saw fit. The only instruction was to compose, 'The scariest music ever written in the history of music.'"

Quite the assignment, then. However, Jason received ample support in this ambitious brief and joined the game's core team in the earliest stages of *Dead Space*'s development. There were just four members of the audio department working at that time, and across the next two years they collectively found their footing to secure a clear idea of how the world of *Dead Space* should feel and sound. Jason highlights the specific sense of dread that grew out of these initial creative blueprints, how the build-up of tension must first be established before the onslaught of horrific combat. "We were very aware of the importance of what Don Veca called, 'The build up to the boo,'" Jason explains, "which is mainly achieved through music and sound design. Most players wouldn't realise that music plays consistently throughout all the gameplay in *Dead Space*. It's when it's at its quietest that it's the most effective."

» [PC] Isaac has to deal with all manner of Necromorph threats, from the very big, to the very small.

As such, Jason's intensely unsettling, almost subliminal score can be mistaken for ambient audio or even sound effects from the spacecraft that Isaac explores throughout the game. The uncertain barriers between sound design and unique composition all add to the palm-dampening terror experienced by the player, as they grip their controller while shining their flashlight through countless long, scarcely lit corridors. "It's more a texture or off-putting tone than something that would be considered music," Jason admits. "And that was layer one of four total layers of music. Each layer increased in tension as the game ratcheted up the horror. It was an incredibly dynamic score that reacted very quickly to the player's actions."



» Jason's excellent soundtrack can be found on places like Amazon Music and Spotify and consists of 17 haunting tracks.

» [PC] Jason's score perfectly matches the on-screen terror, making the player as terrified as Isaac.

» Jason has composed a huge amount of videogame scores, from *The Hobbit* and *Star Trek: Encounters* to *Dead Space: Extraction*.

Navigating a cavernous, poorly lit spacecraft while evading murderous extraterrestrial antagonists, the stomach-tightening horror of *Dead Space* finds plenty of inspiration in the original 'haunted house in space' classic of 1979's *Alien*. In spite of this – and the fact that he owns a copy of that film's score gifted to him by its composer Jerry Goldsmith – Jason looked back even further in time, to avant-garde 20th century composer Krzysztof Penderecki.

> "IT'S MORE A TEXTURE OR OFF-PUTTING TONE THAN SOMETHING THAT WOULD BE CONSIDERED MUSIC"
> JASON GRAVES

Known for his vividly expressive compositions that abandon traditional melodic scaffolding in favour of prickly clusters of sound and sharp textures, the Polish composer's music has been featured in many notable horror films such as *The Exorcist, Shutter Island* and *The Shining*.

This unconventional approach was ideal when creating the musical language of the game's Necromorphs, "former crewmates mutilated by an unknown force", Jason says. "The orchestral techniques I employed followed the same idea. Let's record a 'normal' orchestra, but twist and turn it into something unnatural and ghastly through performance techniques. These included tapping your fingers on the body of the instrument, playing random notes as loud as you can, or running up and down scale patterns as fast as possible."

All of these dissonant, mangled musical expressions were recorded with a full orchestra in brief, incomplete phrases and then threaded together as tracks across the game's score. Like horrific puzzle pieces, and the reanimated corpses of the Necromorphs, Jason's music brilliantly reflects the horrific experiences of the game's protagonist.

Nearly 20 years on Jason says, "I have nothing but respect for the entire development team, for all their incredible work and for giving me the creative freedom to compose the score that I felt would be the most impactful."

While the irony of a name like Jason Graves being linked to a horror series like *Dead Space* is not one lost on Jason, he remains extremely proud of his work on the iconic game.

UNSETTLING AND SUBLIMINAL MESSAGING

The uniquely creepy sound design of Dead Space is laced with hidden, horrifying messages

The survival horror genre relies heavily on atmosphere to heighten the tension of the player experience, and *Dead Space* is a classic example of how sound design can be used to great effect.

In particular, the shrieks of and unsettling whispers of the Necromorphs that the player encounters throughout the game are composed of terrifying subliminal messages. Recordings of phrases such as "cut off their limbs" and "make us whole" were played backwards and then distorted, giving an added sense of creepiness.

The player will also experience numerous hallucinations across the game, due to neural interruptions caused by frequencies emitted from the sinister Marker. Notably, in the game's 2023 remake, the whispers that the player encounters are comprised of deceased characters who subsequently enter a "whisper pool", with their beyond-the-grave broadcasts growing increasingly malevolent as Isaac's mental state deteriorates across the latter half of the narrative.

Images supplied by Greg O'Connor-Read.

Sonic Adventure 2

ONE EDGY HEDGIE

» RETROREVIVAL

» DREAMCAST » 2001 » SONIC TEAM

Sonic's tenth anniversary outing is a funny one, as I initially thought it was an unquestionable improvement over its predecessor, but these days I prefer the original. *Sonic Adventure 2* certainly isn't short on visual flair and when you've mastered the main platform stages, the new moves provide a real sense of flow. Carving a path of destruction with Tails or Robotnik in their mech walkers is often great fun too, even if I do miss the faster pace of E-102's stages from the original. I'm not sure how I overlooked just how infuriating the treasure-hunting stages starring Knuckles and Rouge are, though – as well as being larger and more numerous than before, there's a less effective radar and worse clues.

Of course, if there's anything that's divisive about *Sonic Adventure 2*, it's Shadow. [I'll say – Ed] A dark, angst-filled counterpart to Sonic, who grinds on rails and has an industrial metal theme song? Sonic Team couldn't have been more obvious in its intentions – this was a clear attempt to appeal to the kids who were captivated by Sonic during their infant school days a decade earlier, and had grown into edgy teenagers with Korn hoodies and skateboards. Surely the developers had leaned too hard into an adolescent concept of cool, and in doing so inadvertently created the ultimate personification of cringe?

Nope. Shadow has had a rocky ride since his introduction, from the lows of his spin-off to the highs of being voiced by Keanu Reeves, and even committed fans at Sonic Symphony cheered at the footage of Shadow witnessing his only friend getting shot. But cynics and haters be damned, I *was* one of those teenagers in 2001 and whenever I revisit *Sonic Adventure 2* itself or cherry-pick its best bits in *Shadow Generations*, I have a blast and I'm reminded that Shadow *was* cool. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm off to put on a Linkin Park CD.

>> This month we play through the latest Evercade carts, enjoy a fresh new take on Namco's Pac-Man, build a Lego arcade cabinet and find out if Earthion is as good as everyone says

» [Evercade] For more on *Roguecraft DX* check out our interview on page 14.

Evercade Multi-Game Cartridges: Roguecraft DX & NeoGeo Arcade 1

THE LATEST EVERCADE CARTS PACK SOME REAL HEAT

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN
Shadow Labyrinth
It's certainly not perfect, mainly due to a poor checkpoint system, but I still had a lot of fun with this *Pac-Man*-themed Metroidvania.

NICK
Earthion
Frankly, the only way it could be any better was if I was already playing it on my Mega Drive rather than my PC.

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** EVERCADE FAMILY
- **ALSO ON:** NA
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £19.99 EACH
- **PUBLISHER:** BLAZE ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER:** BADGER PUNCH GAMES/BLAZE ENTERTAINMENT
- **BUY IT FROM:** ONLINE, RETAIL
- **PLAYERS:** 1 (ROGUECRAFT DX), 1-2 (NEO GEO ARCADE 1)

While this year's Evercade cartridges have been something of a mixed bag, things are certainly hotting up as the year draws to a close. As much as we enjoyed the puzzle-focussed structure of *Full Void* and its gorgeous aesthetics, it felt like there simply wasn't enough game there to justify being the first standalone Evercade release. *Roguecraft DX* has no such problems and it's easily the best cartridge Blaze has released this year. If you've never played the Amiga version, *Roguecraft DX* is a roguelike that focusses on exploring dangerous isometric dungeons that are full of treasure and deadly monsters.

You can go dungeon delving with three different characters, all of which have their own unique abilities. The Warrior is your archetypal tank and can soak up large amounts of damage, making him perfect for beginners, while the Rogue has the ability to teleport, which also triggers a deadly backstab attack. The Wizard is the final hero and while he's the weakest of the three, his ranged attack makes him exceptionally powerful and one you should consider using once you have a bit more experience with the game's dungeons.

There's plenty of variety in how each hero plays, while the procedurally generated dungeons ensure that no two games are ever the same. Adding to the

BRIEF HISTORY

» The Evercade originally launched in 2020 and gained an instant following thanks to its physical, curated carts that covered everything from the NES and Mega Drive to Atari's 2600. The brand has continued to gain success in recent years, adding numerous hardware editions and a spin-off Super Pocket range from sister company Hyper Mega Tech!.

» [Evercade] Different monsters have different skills in *Roguecraft DX*. Ghosts can cross impassable tiles.

» [Evercade] *Shock Troopers* is a superb run-and-gun and offers multiple routes and characters to master.

game's randomness is the fact that each new game triggers two random potions (a third will always be healing) meaning your runs can be greatly enhanced (or hindered) depending on what you pick up.

Your goal is the same on each level, meaning you need to explore its many different rooms in search of a key that will grant entry to the next level (of which there are 15). There are numerous secrets you can discover, a huge amount of treasure to pick up and a number of different enemies, all of which have unique attack styles that need to be mastered. It's a surprisingly complex game with the three individual characters adding even more complexity to the game's endless structure.

Rightly acclaimed on the Amiga, the Evercade version is even better, thanks to numerous enhancements that the small team at Badger Punch Games have added. While we'd have loved to see a new character, there's plenty that's been added here. Highlights are five new levels, including the opening Wilderness stage, many new potions that bestow everything from regeneration to confusing monsters, a number of brand-new music tracks and monsters, as well as a high-score table and achievements.

Other enhancements include numerous balance adjustments, monsters that can now poison you and some slight tweaking of the Rogue, making it easier for him to teleport to safety. It makes *Roguecraft DX* an extremely solid upgrade over the Amiga edition, and crucially adds even more longevity to what was already an extremely open-ended game. We played *Roguecraft DX* across all Evercade systems (excluding the original) and experienced no issues, but we'd argue it's best enjoyed on the VS as a TV really showcases the game's gorgeous pixel art.

Blaze's second Evercade cartridge this month marks the first of three announced Neo Geo cartridges, and while the six included titles feel a little stingy considering the size of the system's library, they're all notable games. The most interesting is *Ironclad*, a solid shmup that's been largely confined to the Neo Geo CD outside of a few digital releases. One of the strengths of the Evercade brand is when it brings obscure, expensive games to the system, and this is a perfect example of that.

Metal Slug is another big-hitter for the Neo Geo and remains one of the best games on the system and certainly on this new collection. Yes, the run-and-gun has been re-released countless times now, but it's still great to see here. We're equally pleased with the inclusion of *Shock Troopers*, which is a superb run-and-gun and offers tremendous replay value due to its many playable characters. *Magician Lord* is easily the weakest offering, but still an entertaining enough game, while *The King Of Fighters 2000* and *Sengoku* offer one-on-one fighting and side-scrolling scrapping respectively. The emulation, as you'd expect from Blaze, is of a high standard and all the usual options are present and correct. Like the earlier Toaplan titles, it does feel that more games should be included, particularly with the higher price point to consider now, but this is still a huge improvement over the recent lacklustre *Windjammers*, *Karnov & Friends* collection and certainly something that many Evercade fans will want to get their hands on. ✱

In a nutshell

***Roguecraft DX* is everything you want from a standalone Evercade release, while *NeoGeo Arcade 1* is a fun collection of obscurities and big hitters.**

» [Evercade] *Ironclad* is quite the rarity today, so its inclusion on *NeoGeo Arcade 1* is a real treat.

» *Metal Slug* is extremely expensive in its original form today, so we're pleased to see it on *NeoGeo Arcade 1*.

>> Score **91%**

>> Score **80%**

PICK OF THE MONTH

Shadow Labyrinth

PAC-MAN ENTERS A NEW DIMENSION

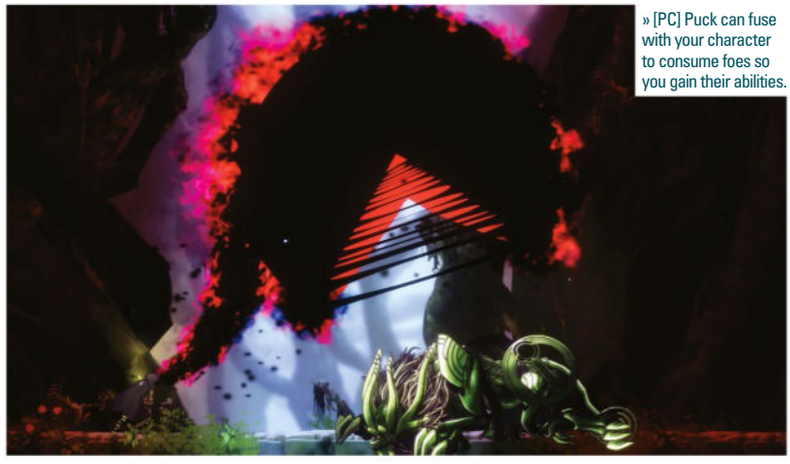
INFORMATION

- **FORMAT:** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS5, SWITCH, SWITCH 2, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £24.95
- **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER:** BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS
- **PLAYERS:** 1

We're not sure what fevered mind at Namco decided to place Pac-Man in a Metroidvania, but we're glad it was given the green light. While *Shadow Labyrinth* may not advance the genre in new and exciting ways, it's great to see that there's plenty of life in Namco's aging icon.

One of the biggest surprises of *Shadow Labyrinth* is not just the direction Namco has taken with its popular star, but also the fact that it's the first *Pac-Man* game to be set in Namco's UGSF (United Galaxy Space Force) timeline, with the Amazon *Secret Level* short *Pac-Man: Circle* serving as a prequel to the game. As a result *Shadow Labyrinth* is as much a love letter to *Pac-Man* as it is to countless other early Namco games, from *Galaga* to *Xevious*.

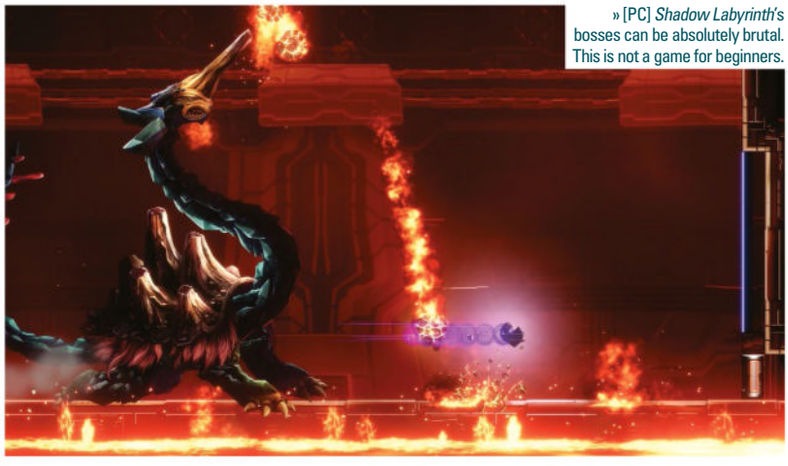
Interestingly, you don't actually play as Pac-Man (or Puck as he's called here) but as a character called Swordsman No 8. While Puck largely acts as a guide it soon becomes obvious that he has his own agenda for teaming up with you and, surprisingly, can come across as quite dickish at times. The only times you do directly control Puck is when you activate rails that he can travel across in his typical Pac-Man fashion to reach new areas and collect the currency that allows you to upgrade abilities. You'll also eventually gain access to the Maze which introduces a number of traditional *Pac-Man* tropes and plays out like a hellish version of *Pac-Man Championship Edition 2*.



» [PC] Puck can fuse with your character to consume foes so you gain their abilities.

You can even transform into a gigantic mech called GAIA for a limited time which makes boss fights easier and lets you access new areas. For the most part though you'll be exploring an alien world in the style of a traditional Metroidvania, slowly gaining powerful new abilities that will allow you to access previously gated off areas. It's here where you can see *Shadow Labyrinth*'s most obvious influences as it shares the difficulty of *Hollow Knight*'s bosses with the dastardly dexterity requirements of the *Ori* series. Add in some poorly placed checkpoints and *Shadow Labyrinth* can be quite the challenge and also extremely frustrating at times as it's not always obvious where you're supposed to go. You'll stick with it though, as there's plenty to discover and each area presents its own unique challenges. Much has been made of *Shadow Labyrinth*'s dour look, but it's actually quite a beautiful-looking game at times, with a neat day/night cycle and a distinctive 2D art style that really shows off some of the game's giant bosses. Equally impressive is the game's atmospheric soundtrack which cleverly mirrors the alien-like locations you explore.

» [PC] The GAIA form lets you grab the discarded bodies of enemies and use them for numerous upgrades.



» [PC] *Shadow Labyrinth*'s bosses can be absolutely brutal. This is not a game for beginners.

Shadow Labyrinth may not be a traditional *Pac-Man* game, but it's certainly one you should investigate. Just be warned that its difficulty takes a good while to get used to.

In a nutshell

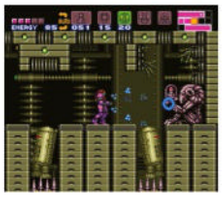
It's brutally hard in places with poorly placed checkpoints and tough bosses, but *Shadow Labyrinth* remains a solid addition to Namco's long-running series.

>> **Score 70%**

WHY NOT TRY

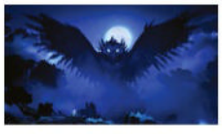
▼ SOMETHING OLD

SUPER METROID (SNES)



▼ SOMETHING NEW

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST (PC)



BRIEF HISTORY

» The original *Pac-Man* lit up arcades in 1980 and was quickly followed by numerous sequels. While many *Pac-Man* games are maze-based, there have been plenty of non-maze spin-offs, including *Pac-Land*, the 3D *Pac-Man World* games and *Pac-Man Party*.

GO DEEPER

The facts behind Shadow Labyrinth

» Development of *Shadow Labyrinth* first began in 2020, with Tomoaki Fukui taking on directorial duties.

» *Shadow Labyrinth* has been released as part of *Pac-Man*'s 45th anniversary. Unusually, no DLC is planned for the game.

» *The Secret Level* short *Pac-Man: Circle* introduces Puck and works as a standalone prequel.

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PICK OF THE MONTH

Earthion

» **System:** PC (version tested), Mega Drive, PS4, PS5, Xbox Series S/X, Switch
» **Buy it for:** £14.99 » **Buy it from:** Online, limitedrungames.com

Yuzo Koshiro first grabbed the attention of gamers outside of Japan via his work on Mega Drive games like *The Revenge Of Shinobi, Streets Of Rage* and *The Story Of Thor,* and now he and his studio Ancient have developed a brand-new shoot-'em-up for Sega's 16-bit console – that version is coming in 2026, but digital editions for modern platforms are ready now.

This is a horizontal shoot-'em-up as you know and love them. Waves of small enemies drop green crystals, which power up both your main shot and the various secondary weapons acquired as power-ups. Level design is reminiscent of genre classics like *Gradius* and *R-Type*, and you'll fight some big, bad bosses. The modern twist comes when you take a hit – you'll lose power from your weapons and lose a bit of shield energy. Stay out of trouble and your shield will regenerate, but if you keep taking hits, your secondary weapons will be destroyed and you'll eventually lose a life. It's a relatively forgiving system, which will be welcome news to those who find the genre's classics to be too punishing, and the higher difficulties are a welcome challenge for genre fanatics.

By the standards of the Mega Drive, *Earthion*'s presentation is absolutely top level stuff. The sprites and backgrounds are detailed and well animated, with bosses standing out as highlights, and there are some very neat special effects on display – the best being some impressive pseudo-scaling sprites. As you'd expect from a Yuzo Koshiro game, the music is also fantastic. For fans of *Caravan*-style score-attack modes, there's a set of challenges to try from the main menu. The whole package is rounded out with online leaderboards, good display and audio options and a selection of demo and prototype versions to play.

Earthion is up there with the very best Mega Drive shooters, going toe-to-toe with the *Thunder Force* games, and you should try it if you have any interest in the genre at all.

>> **Score 94%**

» [PC] This hulking robot isn't even one of the main bosses, it's the mid-boss of stage 5.

» [PC] You've got to blast your way through squishy biological matter in this icky stage.

Golden Tee Arcade Classics

» **System:** PC (version tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X, Switch » **Buy it for:** £24.99
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail (PS5 and Switch only)

This series of arcade golf games from Incredible Technologies has been a popular staple of bars for over three decades now, and this compilation includes six early entries, from *Golden Tee 3D Golf* to *Golden Tee Classic*. *Shuffleshot* and *World Class Bowling* are also included. Digital Eclipse handled this package and has made a creditable effort to translate the trackball controls for controllers, but they'll never feel quite right – fortunately, real trackballs are supported for series enthusiasts. Unfortunately the collection doesn't feature the wealth of brilliant extras we've come to expect from Digital Eclipse, with only some arcade flyers to look at.

NICK THORPE

>> **Score 65%**

Lego: Arcade Machine

» **Buy it for:** £34.99 » **Buy it from:** lego.com

The latest set from Lego is a delightful little build that not only tugs at the retro heartstrings, but will hopefully lead to similar designs in the future. The build itself consists of six paper bags that contain the 468 pieces needed to design the arcade cabinet. It's not a particularly challenging build, taking just over an hour to complete, but there's a lot of interesting techniques and building the insides (the cabinet splits apart to reveal a retro game pad) is a lot of fun. Yes it's a generic game and not a licensed one like the earlier, magnificent *Pac-Man* build, but that does mean Lego can keep costs down. The end result is a delightful little shelf piece that captures the glory days of the arcade.

DARRAN JONES

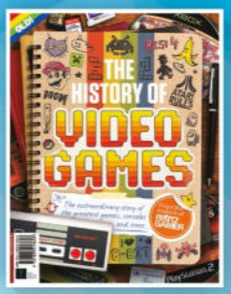
Toaplan Arcade Collection Vol 1

» **System:** Switch (version tested), PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series S/X » **Buy it for:** £31.99
» **Buy it from:** Online, retail

Few names are as revered by shoot-'em-up fans as Toaplan, and this compilation proves exactly why that is. You'll find everything from the merciless precision of *Tiger-Heli*'s enemies to the early bullet hell of *Batsugun* here, with *Flying Shark, Twin Cobra, Fire Shark, Out Zone, FixEight* and *Dogyuun* also included to keep you blasting all night long. The emulation is solid and you get alternative regional versions, dip switch options and audio and visual filter options, so it's hard to fault in gameplay terms. The only thing this lacks compared to the very best compilations is some museum-style extras, just to add a little context.

NICK THORPE

>> **Score 88%**



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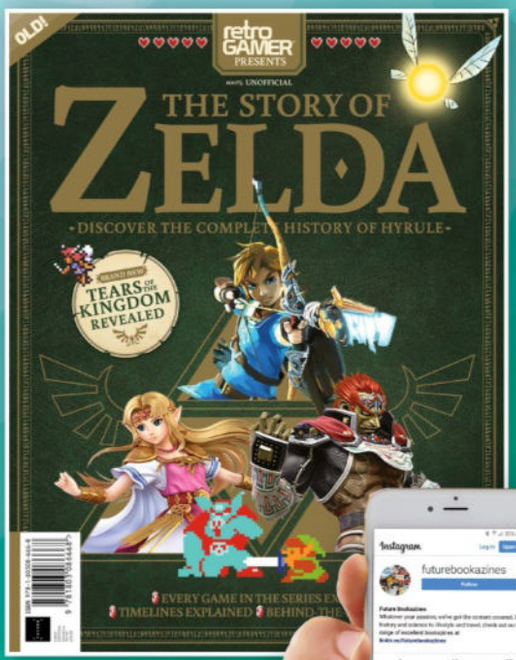

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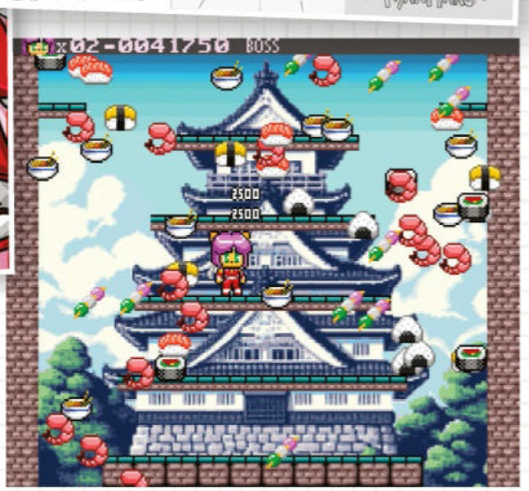
THE HOMEBREWER'S KIT

<YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO EVERYTHING HAPPENING IN THE HOMEBREW SCENE/>

<!--- DESIGN SKETCHES FOR THE CHARACTERS, COURTESY OF SARUMARU. --->



<!--- [PC] BEATING THE BOSS GIVES A SHOWER OF SUSHI TO COLLECT FOR BONUS POINTS. --->

<!--- [PC] THE PC VERSION FEATURES BORDERS AROUND THE GAMEPLAY. THIS IS LEVEL 2'S CAVES. --->

<INTRO> WE HAVE THREE MEGA DRIVE CARTRIDGES TO TEST THIS MONTH, HIGHLIGHTING JUST HOW MUCH INTEREST THERE STILL IS IN THE POPULAR 16-BIT CONSOLE. 8-BIT FANS CAN CHECK OUT A FORTHCOMING GAME WHERE YOU PAINT THE PLATFORMS YOU WALK ON, AND THE FINAL ISSUE OF A LONG-RUNNING MSX DISK MAGAZINE. THE HIGHLIGHT IS OUR MAIN FEATURE, WITH A SUPERB SINGLE-SCREEN PLATFORMER HEADING TO A LESS-COMMON FORMAT. </INTRO>

<MAIN HEADER>

NEW NINJA NEEDED

<INTRO> BECOME A NINJA CAT IN THE BRILLIANT SINGLE-SCREEN PLATFORMER THE NYANJA FROM SARUPRO TEAM, WHICH WAS RECENTLY FUNDED ON KICKSTARTER </INTRO>

<BODY> ***The Nyanja*'s designer Sarumaru has long been a fan of NEC's PC Engine.** "As a kid, I always wanted to create art for a game company like Hudson. Once I started working on digital art, I began putting together more convincing-looking game mock-ups," we're told. "When I met the programmer, Tater Pants, I was finally able to bring my idea to reality. I am a huge fan of one-screen arcade platformers like *Bubble Bobble* and *Snow Bros*, and had our own little twist on the mechanics."

The team is targeting the PC Engine Super CD-ROM². "I created our kitty ninja hero in the early Noughties. I renamed him Nyanmaru, gave him a female partner, Nekomi, and created a story around this cat world in a land called Jipang – the word Marco Polo used to describe Japan," explains Sarumaru. "Character sprites are being created with Photoshop, limited to 16 colours per sprite. A couple of backgrounds used real references, and some use photo elements that are then digitised and redrawn."

Interestingly, all the bonus items are Japanese food. "I found it fitting to use foods of the region," Sarumaru explains. "One high-point item is the tempura shrimp, a favourite of Nyanmaru. There are seven worlds, with ten stages. Each world introduces at least one new enemy type, with each world having its unique boss. The Shadow Kitsune Gang bosses all wear fox masks. The sprites themselves were a bit of a challenge, as each boss is about four times the size of the hero characters, so it becomes harder to animate at times."

Programmer Tater Pants was happy to share development details relating to the new game and how sprite wrapping was handled when moving from one side of the screen to appear on the opposite side. "Code is written in Notepad++ and compiled with batch files on the command line (this applies to both versions)." For left/right, all I did was extend the map to off-screen

NYANJA NECESSITIES

SELECT A NINJA

<The game offers a choice between two cool cats – Nyanmaru in blue and Nekomi in pink. />

LETTER GRABBING

<Picking up bonus letters to spell NYANJA in the lower border is a familiar gameplay idea from other single-screen platformers. />

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- THE NYANJA TEAM - TATER PANTS (PROGRAMMER), SARUMARU (DESIGNER AND ARTIST), AND SERGIO (MUSICIAN). --->

areas for collision purposes and set the X coordinate to the other side, and top/bottom is just looking at the Y coordinate of an entity and setting it to the top of the screen if it gets too low."

Sarumaru also feels the game's music is going to impress gamers. "Sergio Elisondo, also known by his stage name, Sergio And The Holograms, has worked on numerous projects and created *Ninja I & II* (NES). He's a talented guitarist, composer and can compose traditional chiptune music."

So how much longer until *Nyanja* is finished? "I would say it's about 85% complete. There are some things we may add, depending on time and resources," says Sarumaru. "We hope to have the game ready for shipping by November of this year. Digital versions of both the TurboGrafx/PC Engine game and the Steam/PC versions will be available. You can still pledge for the Kickstarter exclusive goodies!" Visit bit.ly/nyanja-kickstarter for more, or try the demo at bit.ly/nyanja-demo </BODY>

<INTRO> IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE NYANJA'S GAMEPLAY EXPLAINED </INTRO>

FUN UPGRADES

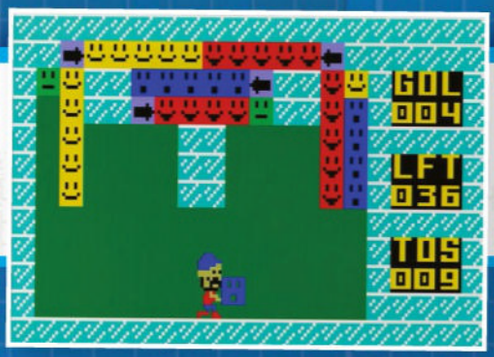
<Defeated enemies will drop upgrades for your weapons, and sometimes a helpful shield that will protect you for a short while. />

BOSS FIGHTS

<A large boss waits at the end of each of the seven worlds, the first being based on a Kabuki theatre actor. />

GOBBLE THE SUSHI

<Like the fruit in *Bubble Bobble*, defeated enemies drop sushi items – collect them to gain bonus points. />



<!--- [INTELLIVISION] THROW THAT BLUE BLOCK TO GET RID OF THE BLUE COLUMN IN BLOCK 'EM SOCK 'EM. --->

NEWS BYTES

<INTRO> ALL THE LATEST NEWS, HANDILY ARRANGED BY FORMAT </INTRO>

<**Amiga:** *Krogharr The Berserker* is a scrolling beat-'em-up from Tigerskunk and currently $12 on itch. (1 Mb RAM, any Amiga) go rampaging at bit.ly/krogharr-amiga />

<**Apple II:** Colin Leroy-Mira has converted *Shufflepuck Café*, with mouse controls and a clever two-player mode via a null modem cable. Shuffle on over to bit.ly/shufflepuck-apple />

<**BBC Micro:** Alec Barker released the underwater maze game, *AreGo: Deep Sea Rescue*. Play it by visiting bit.ly/arego-bbc />

<**Book:** Shaun McClure has published *How To Design Adventure Games*, available in paperback and Kindle. Get reading at tinyurl.com/DesignAdventureGames />

<**Intellivision:** John Hancock's block-breaking puzzle game *Block 'Em Sock 'Em* has been converted and is $9.99. Grab it from bit.ly/blockem-intellivsion />

<**PC:** Check out *The Utterly Splendid Adventures Of Horace* by Langford Productions, recreating the classic character's games. Name your price at bit.ly/horace-pc />

<**PET:** Fill the screen and dodge the Qix in *Qixie* by Milasoft. Find it at bit.ly/qixie-pet />

<**PICO-8:** Defeat the sleepwalkers with your crowbar in *CREW* by the Plush Girls. Play it at bit.ly/crew-pico8 />

<**Vic-20:** Anders Persson updated his game *Tribbles*, with computer opponents and up to eight players at once (requires 8K memory expansion). It's at bit.ly/tribbles-vic />

<**ZX81:** The *Asteroids*-style *Crazy-Roids* by Adrian Pilkington requires 16K of memory and can be downloaded at bit.ly/crazyroids />

<**ZX Spectrum:** DF Design has released *Sam Fox Pin-up Poker*, with Northern Games planning a physical cassette version. The chips and clothes are down at bit.ly/pinup-zx Thalamus Digital released digital downloads of *Sanxion: The Spectrum Remix* and *Delta Charge* for Spectrum owners at $1 each. Get them from thalamusdigital.itch.io />

CHAMPION CODER

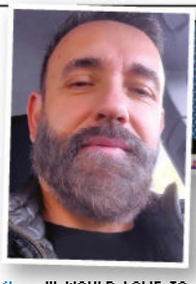
SANDRO MESTRE

<INTRO> ALSO KNOWN AS IAPETUS, SANDRO WAS FIRST INTERVIEWED IN RG82 AND NOW RETURNS WITH A BRAND-NEW CHARACTER </INTRO>

<INFO FROM: ALGARVE, PORTUGAL WEBSITE: YOUTUBE.COM/@IAPETUSRETROSTUFF FORMAT: C64, ACORN ELECTRON, THOMSON MO5/TO8, ORIC, ZX SPECTRUM PREVIOUS GAMES: NANAKO IN CLASSIC JAPANESE MONSTER CASTLE (C64, 2010), UWOL QUEST FOR MONEY (C64, 2012), SIR ABABOL (C64, 2012), ZEZITO AND THE LOST STARS (ELECTRON, 2025) WORKING ON: ZEZITO IN THE GLITTERING CAVES (MO5, C64, ZX SPECTRUM, ELECTRON) />

WHAT INSPIRED YOUR CHARACTER ZEZITO?

<Zezito is the little Portuguese kid of my youth who played in the streets with his friends, inventing their own worlds and adventures, before we started having computers. Zezito literally means Little Joseph. />



<!--- "I WOULD LOVE TO DO PHYSICAL COPIES OF THESE NEW GAMES," SAYS SANDRO. --->

CAN YOU TELL US WHAT DEVELOPMENT TOOLS YOU CURRENTLY USE?

<Usually Visual Studio Code, grafx2, Aseprite, Charpad and Spritepad, plus machine-specific tools. I code my own tools in Python, Java or C when needed; these are usually level data or graphics-related. For example, the program I created in Java to compile software sprites for the Thomson machines, or the program to convert binary data to Forth-usable code. />

WHAT INSPIRED GLITTERING CAVES AND ITS PAINT THE PLATFORMS MECHANIC, SANDRO?

<I liked *Amidar*, and when I saw *Night Knight* by Juan J Martinez, I decided to do something similar. I had a working version of the game engine ready in a couple of weeks. It was the first time I was programming in Forth, and it is completely different from the other languages I was used to (people say it is a bit like doing things backwards!) Debugging code was a bit time-consuming. />

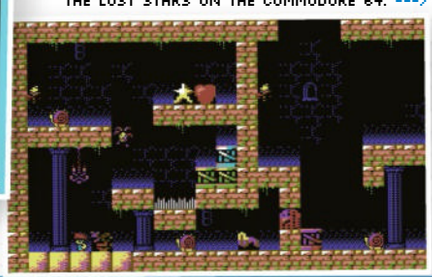
HOW IS THE GAME PROGRESSING?

<I am finishing *Glittering Caves* for the C64, which I am coding using DurexForth. This started as an excuse to program a game using Forth. It has been a rewarding experience! I have started versions for other machines, programmed in assembler. The more advanced version is for the Thomson MO5. The other two versions are a bit behind, for the Electron and ZX Spectrum. I also want to code the C64 version of *Lost Stars*. I have done some of the graphics already. />

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR DREAM TITLE TO DEVELOP?

<I always wanted to program a game like those of the legendary Jon Ritman, *Head Over Heels* or *Batman*, using more of the C64's capabilities – with more colours on the screen using sprites and multicolour mode. It is a challenge, but doable. />

<!--- [THOMSON MO5] PAINTING THE PLATFORMS IN THE FRENCH COMPUTER'S VERSION OF GLITTERING CAVES. --->



<!--- [C64] AN EARLY PREVIEW OF ZEZITO AND THE LOST STARS ON THE COMMODORE 64. --->

DATA BURST

COLOCO DX

<INFO FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE / GENESIS CREDITS: TUXEDO GAMEDEVS PRICE: 54,90 EUROS (CARTRIDGE) WEB: BIT.LY/COLOCODX />

<BODY> **Originally a Spectrum and Amstrad game (download it for free at tuxedogamedevs.com), we previewed this conversion in RG243.** The title stands for *Cosmos Orbital Landing Outer Crash Officer Deluxe* and you fly your rescue ship into a series of caves to pick up stranded pilots. Playing like *Space Taxi* and *Thrust*, your craft can pick up extra tools that require battery power; these include a drill to break through rocks, a hacking key to unlock coloured doors, and a plasma cannon to eliminate enemies. Your main fuel tank is also draining as you use your thrusters, but you can refill at fuel platforms or pick up a fuel can. The first world eases you in nicely and teaches you the basics as more hazards (including flying creatures that kill on contact) are introduced across its multiple stages. In Easy and Normal modes, you can use the grey platforms as checkpoints to respawn when you die, but Hard mode takes this ability away. If you clear a level without using the platforms, you get a Perfect bonus. Easy Mode also restricts the number of levels you can play. Your best completion times for the 30 levels and extra modes unlocked are saved to the cartridge. This is a fun and interesting take on the genre for console fans and highly recommended. </BODY>

SCORE: 86%

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] YOU DON'T HAVE THE RIGHT COLOUR COMBINATION,SO THAT MINER WILL HAVE TO WAIT. --->

NEW GAMES NEEDED

Our new email address is waiting for all your homebrew news, previews and more: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] NNAR IS CERTAINLY AN IMPRESSIVE-LOOKING PLACE. --->

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] ELRIK USES THE DAEMONCLAW TO TAKE OUT A FISHY-LOOKING ENEMY. --->

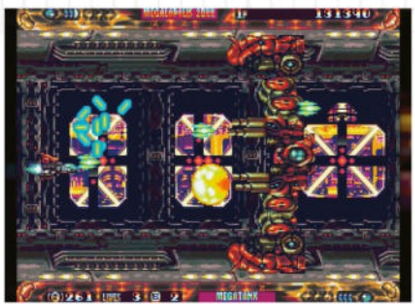
DAEMONCLAW – ORIGINS OF NNAR

<INFO FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE / GENESIS (TESTED), PC AND NEO-GEO TO FOLLOW CREDITS: NEOFID STUDIOS WITH BITBEAMCANNON PRICE: 69,99 EUROS (CARTRIDGE), 79,99 EUROS (CARTRIDGE PLUS STEAM DOWNLOAD) WEB: BIT.LY/DAEMONCLAW />

<BODY> **The Zverkin armies have attacked Nnar, so the wizard Theadren appoints a suitable hero.** Elrik uses the DaemonClaw, while Gareth (guest starring from *Demons Of Asterborg*) wields a sword. Defeated enemies drop red and blue orbs, which can be collected to spawn health power-ups and mana, respectively. Mana helps to power special moves, while magic orbs unleash stronger attacks. By completing Arcade Mode, the player unlocks Tag Team (two players alternating control), Survival, and Boss Rush modes. Excellent animation and detailed backgrounds highlight the game's high polish, and there are decent sound effects and music. The difficulty is high, particularly during the boss fights, and the controls need mastering, but this remains a stylish but challenging game which feels similar to Neofid's previous titles. </BODY>

SCORE: 84%

<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] SOME OF THE SPRITES ARE ABSOLUTELY ENORMOUS AND THERE'S GREAT USE OF COLOUR THROUGHOUT. --->



<!--- [MEGA DRIVE] THERE'S A WIDE RANGE OF BOSSES TO TAKE OUT, SO BE SURE TO GRAB THE GAME'S MANY POWER-UPS. --->

ZPF

<INFO FORMAT: MEGA DRIVE / GENESIS CREDITS: ZPF TEAM (MIKAEL TILLANDER, PERRY SESSIONS, JAMIE VANCE), MEGA CAT STUDIOS (PUBLISHER) PRICE: TBC WEB: BIT.LY/ZPF-MEGADRIVE />

<BODY> **Kickstarter backers are receiving this impressive horizontal shmup with three playable characters across three settings (Fantasy, Future and Alien).** Defeated enemies drop medals, which are used to purchase upgrades, extra lives and continues. There are secrets to discover and multiple endings, with massive bosses to destroy. The graphics are fantastic and varied, and the soundtrack is excellent. The fact that medals are collected automatically is helpful, but not starting with a continue proves frustrating at times. The options menu lets you tweak the difficulty, easing you into the fast-paced action of this entertaining but challenging shooter. </BODY>

SCORE: 89%

PROCESSING

<INTRO> KOEN DOLS TALKS ABOUT THE FORTHCOMING 50TH AND FINAL EDITION OF THE FUTUREDISK DISKMAG FOR THE MSX </INTRO>

<BODY> **Back in 1992, Koen was part of an MSX club.** "I founded *FutureDisk* together with Dennis Lardenoye, until it came to an end in 2000. The MSX scene in the Netherlands had reached a low point. When we rebooted in 2021 with *FutureDisk* 46, 50 was a magical number we set out to reach, and it is a good moment to stop – while floppy disks are still available."

As well as articles in Dutch and English, there is a software menu. "It includes *Nora* by the creators of *Pampas & Selene*, and *Sweet Acorn 2* (for MSX2). *Peng Pong* is a minigame where you play volleyball with penguins," Koen says. "Two patches translate the intro demo of *Burai* and the entire game *Seed Of Dragon* into English. A special version of *Bun-Ga-Rua*, the MSXDev 2024 winner, and a preview of *NightStalker*, a new *Castlevania* clone, complete the package. I'm afraid the physical disk will be sold out by the time this article is published, but nearly all FDs can be played and read via futuredisk.nl" </BODY>

<!--- [MSX] THE HUGE PREVIEW OF NIGHTSTALKER IS VERY IMPRESSIVE, WITH CHARACTER INTERACTIONS AND ENEMIES TO WHIP. --->

HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

NINJA NOSTALGIA

Reminiscing about the Shinobi series

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

With *Shinobi* on the cover this issue, it feels like high time we talked about the fun we've had with Sega's shuriken-slinging, sword-swinging series. It may be a notoriously tricky series, but Darran clearly has some ninja skills, as you're about to find out…

NICK

I started with the 'first' *Shinobi* game, but that was on the Master System. Darran, I know you started with the arcade game – how about you, Tim?

DARRAN

As you mentioned, I played it in arcades back in the day, but we also had it at our local Circle K. True story, they actually banned me from playing it because I could single credit it and was losing them money.

TIM

Arcade version for me, then the Amiga. At least I could get past the first boss on the Amiga, without spending all my pocket money. It was a birthday present. Cheers Rich!

NICK

I remember struggling with that first boss on the Master System too, Tim. It was interesting to see the way the series went in a few different directions, depending on the platform you had, particularly the Game Gear games – which games did you both play next?

DARRAN

I had the Master System game which was solid, and I was hyped for *Revenge*. It looked amazing and had superb music and fun bosses, but it was sooooo slow compared to the arcade original. I also enjoyed the two Game Gear games.

TIM

Must have been *Shadow Dancer*, with the dog, on the Amiga again. Probably played it in the arcades too. I think I'm getting confused with other ninja games, *Shadow Warriors*? The one where you could hang from a lamppost and kick, and another where you were cyborg ninjas and your 'skin' falls off when you get hit?

DARRAN

Shadow Warriors is *Ninja Gaiden* mate, and the other game you mention is *The Ninja Warriors*. I liked how *Shadow Dancer* on the Mega Drive was different to the arcade game. Cool bonus stage as well.

NICK

You guys were lucky. My next one was *The Cyber Shinobi*, a game that seems to have been designed to convince Master System owners that it was time to upgrade. That one didn't even have a bonus stage.

DARRAN

You poor thing, should have got *Alex Kidd In Shinobi World* instead. Are we all in agreement that *Shinobi III* is amazing?

NICK

Definitely. Joe's so much more agile and the new moves are really satisfying to use, and then you have cool new bits like the horse-riding stage and the surfing. When I looked back at the reviews, I was quite surprised to find that they were all a bit unenthusiastic.

» [Arcade] Beating *Shinobi* in a single credit is pretty impressive – shame the Circle K people disagreed.

TIM

Yep, *Shinobi III* is a bloody brilliant game!

DARRAN

Some of those reviews are mad, it's everything I wanted the first Mega Drive game to be. Here's a controversial *Shinobi* take. After originally disliking *Shinobi X* (I slagged it off big time in *games™* once) I actually think it's a fun game.

TIM

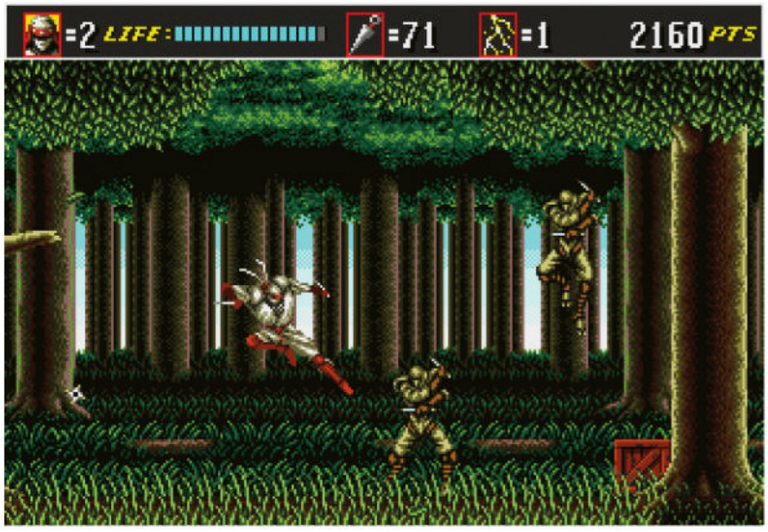
Unfortunately, I didn't have a Saturn to play *Shinobi X* on. It feels like I'm missing out.

DARRAN

It feels like you're being sarcastic.

NICK

I only played it for the first time recently, and I kind of felt like it was a step back from *Shinobi III*.



» [Mega Drive] We're all in agreement that *Shinobi III* is the pinnacle of the series so far.

» [3DS] The 3DS game tends to get overlooked a lot, but we quite enjoyed it back in 2011.

» [Saturn] *Shinobi X* is a solid game, but Nick came to it after playing *Art Of Vengeance*.

The choice of digitised graphics is understandable in retrospect, but I didn't feel like it controlled as well. It's not so bad, but I can see why it didn't set the world on fire. And then of course, the series went on hiatus until the PlayStation 2 games.

DARRAN
Did you play those, Tim?

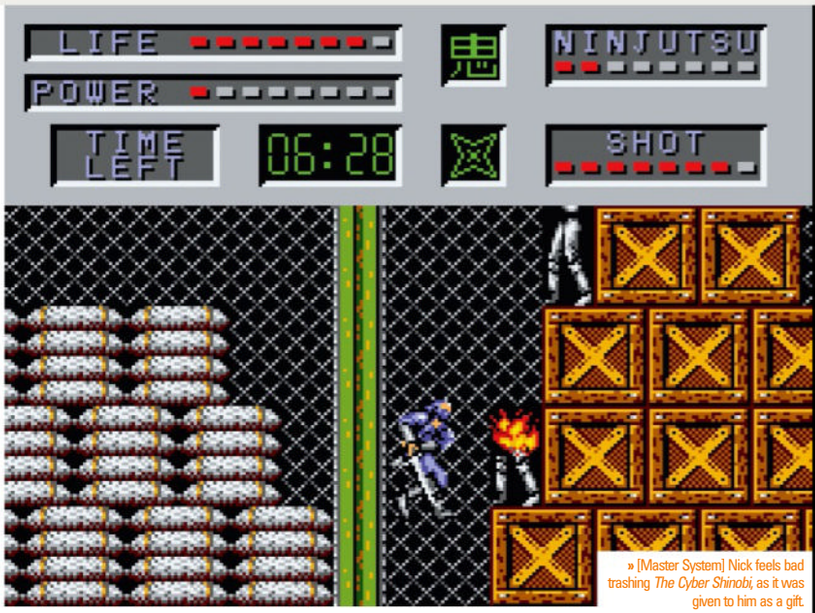
TIM
I recall watching you play it back when you were on *games™*. And aside from the cool scarf all I remember is that it was incredibly difficult. Like insanely so, that might have put me off a bit.

DARRAN
But I thought you loved to play difficult games, Tim.

TIM
I do! I really don't know why I never got it though. Maybe everyone traded in their review copies at Game or something.

NICK
You're right though, it was a really tough game, especially with the need to constantly kill enemies to keep your health up. *Nightshade* gave you some tools to help mitigate that, but it was also difficult. It's a shame Sega didn't go further with the 3D games, really.

DARRAN
Nightshade was a great upgrade and fixed many of the issues of the first game. Did anyone enjoy the 3DS game, because I think that came next.



» [Master System] Nick feels bad trashing *The Cyber Shinobi*, as it was given to him as a gift.

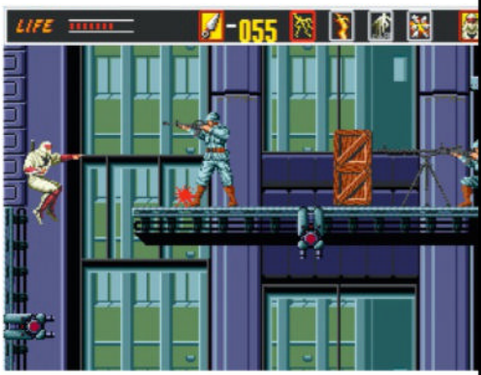
> "Unfortunately, I didn't have a Saturn to play Shinobi X on"
> **TIM EMPEY**

NICK
I did like that one, it was one of the first games I got for the system. I seem to recall the main game being pretty reasonable, and the Streetpass challenges having that trademark *Shinobi* difficulty.

DARRAN
Here's hoping the new game is more like *Shinobi III* and less like *The Cyber Shinobi*.

NICK
I don't think I could handle a disappointment like that. Thankfully, I've played enough to know it won't be. ✱

» [PlayStation 2] It was surprising to hear that difficulty was the primary thing that put Tim off the PS2 game.



» [Mega Drive] The pace of *The Revenge Of Shinobi* didn't capture Darran, after the comparatively speedy arcade game.

» [Amiga] That first boss is always tricky, thanks to a small hit box and unpredictable fireball motions.

READERS REACT

What is your favourite Shinobi game?

Lee Jackson
Shinobi III. Gameplay is fine-tuned, the levels offer a lot of variety and memorable moments, it's visually stunning to look at, and the soundtrack manages to go toe to toe with Koshiro's score from *The Revenge Of Shinobi*. Easily one of the best games to showcase the Mega Drive in my opinion.

Ramon Nafria Alias Edokko
As a developer and teacher of game design, *GG Shinobi* is a very good example of smart level design, and a game that is inspired by *Mega Man* without looking like a game inspired by *Mega Man*. Also, it's one of my favourite games ever.

Stuart Gipp
For me, it's the Master System version of the original. A fantastic conversion that makes concessions for console players while retaining the pacey, action-packed gameplay and diverse level design.

Jim
Despite discovering *Shinobi* with the first one on the PC Engine GT, *Shinobi III* is my favourite, the tunes, the combat, awesome art, frantic action. This is where I've taken the most influences to level design *Shinobi: Art of Vengeance*.

Big Hairy Marty
The copyright infringing nature of *The Revenge Of Shinobi* is easily my favourite. Joe Musashi must be one dangerous ninja if Neo Zeed have to seek the help of Godzilla, the Terminator (reprogrammed to mimic the Incredible Hulk), Spider-Man and Batman to try and take him down.

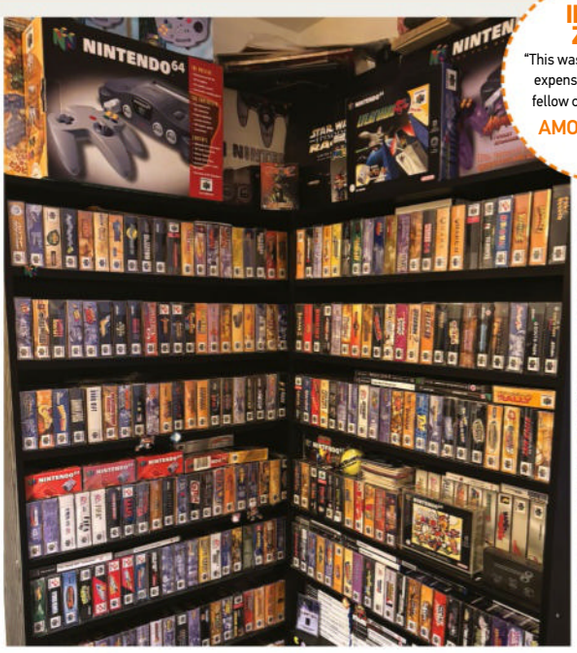
Forgotten Worlds
Shinobi on PS2 is criminally overlooked. Being able to chain together death blows to multiple enemies and take them all down at once was super cool.

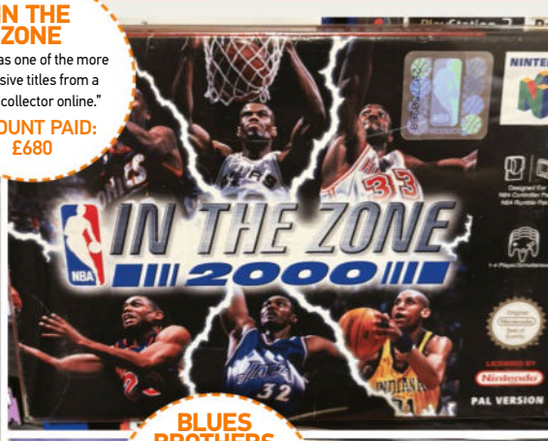
Brian H
It has and always will be my favourite *Shinobi* game and that is the arcade original. It had a few decent home ports notably the Master System but sadly never got a Mega Drive/Genesis port. It took everything that made *Rolling Thunder* great and refined it.

MrThunderwing
The Revenge Of Shinobi. The second Mega Drive game I ever got after upgrading from the Master System. It had incredible Yuzo Koshiro music, the graphics were arcade quality and it played fantastically.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**





IN THE ZONE

"This was one of the more expensive titles from a fellow collector online."

AMOUNT PAID: £680

BLUES BROTHERS

"This mint game was actually part of a bundle, I was very happy to find it in this condition."

AMOUNT PAID: £200

BIO

NAME:
Jack Snook

LOCATION:
UK

ESTIMATED VALUE OF COLLECTION:
Worth (approx): £27,500

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
Nintendo 64

FAVOURITE GAME:
GoldenEye 007

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Jack and Ronnie Snook have a superb N64 collection

Before collecting a full European set of N64 titles, Jack Snook started his gaming journey way back in his early school days. "I first discovered gaming at primary school, playing *Granny's Garden* on the BBC," he remembers fondly. "It was one of those old 'go left, go right, or go straight' text games. Later, my friend got a NES for Christmas, and we fell in love with *Mario Bros.* Then my experiences grew further playing *Mario Kart* with friends until the early hours. We also occasionally bunked off school to go to the local arcade, playing *Street Fighter II* and *Killer Instinct*. I can still hear 'ultra combo' ringing out across the floor. It was always the loudest machine."

When Jack got to adulthood, he rediscovered his love for Nintendo titles during a chance moment. "I started collecting retro by accident," Jack explains. "I bought an N64 with a few games locally 12 years ago, so I could relive my memories and show my kids what we used to play. After a few months, I sold it and used the cash to buy a fully boxed one. I then started buying the odd title, and before I knew it, I was looking for the perfect condition on my favourite titles. It just snowballed from there."

Jack tells us how collecting created a new bond with his son, Ronnie, who has autism. "Collecting the N64 set gave us a platform to bond over on a level that works for us. He was the one who helped me organise it, in alphabetical order, of course," Jack explains. "We ended up with duplicates and protective cases on the shelf for the missing titles rather than having to start over. I truly believe that without his input and the way his autism works, I'd still have piles of games all over the house. He loved the process of removing the blank dust protector and replacing it with the complete title. It was a lovely moment for us both."

But why was it the N64 that gripped them both? "I went for N64 because it's my favourite. When my little lad showed a huge interest, it just became something we did together. He handed me parcels when I returned from work, excited to see what was inside. This kept the collecting exciting for me, especially when the complete set was in reach."

We ask Jack where he sees his collection heading. "I'd like to upgrade some titles where I'm not happy with the condition, so the whole set is like new. After finishing the set, I was a bit lost, so I decided to start a new collection of obscure horror titles across different platforms, with *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* being the top two. This also allows me to maintain that bonding experience with my little lad, who quickly and willingly enjoyed the jump from one genre to another."

Finally, what is the one grail item left to find? "Not a huge item, but I've always wanted a *Turok: Rage Wars* grey NTSC cart. The original was black but had a problem with the multiplayer mode. When players contacted Nintendo, they were sent a replacement grey cart that had the bug fixed."

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com retrogamermag.bsky.social

RAT ATTACK

"I was very lucky to win this one in an online competition after buying a raffle ticket."

AMOUNT PAID: £9.00

PAPER MARIO

"This one came with the original shipper from a collector selling online."

AMOUNT PAID: £420

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

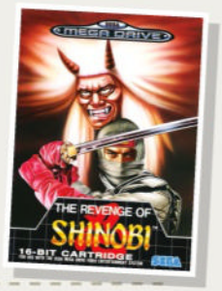
SMOKE GREY NINTENDO 64

■ "This was a standard online purchase, but I did get it at a great price."

PAID: £90

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices



THE COVER STAR

THE REVENGE OF SHINOBI

Complete boxed copies can be bought for under **£25,** with mint ones costing over **£40.** Loose carts can be had for under **£10.** It's also available on myriad Mega Drive collections for various systems and with a Nintendo Switch Online membership.

FRONTIER: ELITE II

Those just wanting to play the Amiga version can pick up loose disks for around **£5.** But collectors wanting everything complete in great condition will be shooting towards the **£20** mark.

DESCENT

Not one that comes up often, but it isn't that expensive for a PC title. A jewel case disc can be purchased for just over **£10,** while a complete-in-box copy is around **£25.**

NAVY MOVES

The original release double cassette goes for over **£20** and more in good, complete condition. Bargain hunters may wish to hunt the cheaper *The Hit Squad* version.

FINAL FANTASY VI

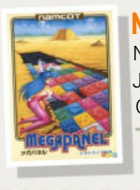
Unsurprisingly, the NTSC-U port of this classic (look for *Final Fantasy III*) is expensive; boxed copies sell for over **£150.** The Japanese version is cheaper, and there is a remaster to purchase digitally.

JAK AND DAXTER: THE PRECURSOR LEGACY

Superb platforming action isn't expensive as copies of Naughty Dog's dynamic duo adventure can be bought for under **£2,** with very good condition copies costing about **£7.**

DEAD SPACE

A trip to space won't cause your wallet to die, as good condition Xbox 360 copies of this space romp behemoth can cost as little as **£3.50** complete.



MEGAPANEL

Namcot's Mega Drive puzzler is best bought from Japan, where it will cost the equivalent of about **£40.** Copies in the USA have sold for over **£70** recently.

HOW MUCH?!

CLUB NINTENDO 3DS

Only the most hardened of Mario fans will want to shell out for this special Club Nintendo 3DS. This new one, with all contents complete, sold for over **£4,000.**

Prices correct at time of print

» [PC Engine] Richter needs to get a move on, you don't want to be chased by that thing.

IN THE KNOW

- » PUBLISHER: KONAMI
- » DEVELOPER: KONAMI
- » PLATFORM: PC ENGINE
- » RELEASED: 1993
- » PRICE TODAY: £130+

» The PSP's *Dracula X Chronicles* was the game's first release in Europe and North America.

» Reproduction copies are widely available on eBay, so check that yours is an original before you buy.

CASTLEVANIA: RONDO OF BLOOD

The Belmont family's vendetta against the vampires has been taken to many platforms, but the lone Castlevania to hit the PC Engine is considered to be a highlight for both the series and the console. But does the game merit the hefty prices it now commands?

THE GAME

The tenth entry in the *Castlevania* series takes place in 1792 and features Richter Belmont in the starring role, as he becomes the latest heir of the Vampire Killer whip to venture to Dracula's castle and try to take out the blood-sucking baddie. Fans of the series will know exactly what to expect – a platform game featuring plenty of enemy monsters in the western horror tradition, from skeletons and zombies to bosses that include a wyvern, a werewolf who doesn't seem to be particularly bothered with clothing himself, and even Death itself. Along the way, there are plenty of damsels in distress within the castle who will also need to be rescued.

Like *Super Castlevania IV* on the SNES and *Castlevania: The New Generation* on the Mega Drive, *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* utilises the traditional Castlevania formula that the series started with, and is one of the later games in the series to do so. In contrast to the other familiar formula introduced in *Symphony Of The Night*, the action takes place in distinct stages rather than across an open map, and a regular power-up system is used instead of the RPG-style system with experience points and equipment. Some new wrinkles have been included too, including the Item Crash system that allows you to perform an extra special attack with a sufficient number of hearts. If you've only ever played *Symphony Of The Night*, this is the game the intro stage is pulled from.

THE QUALITY

Few developers could touch the quality of Konami's output in the early Nineties, and *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* is a fine example of why. Look at the screenshots and you'll see huge enemies, detailed sprites and backgrounds to match, and even some impressive pseudo-parallax effects that really pushed the ageing hardware to its limits. It really says a lot that plenty of sprites were reused for *Symphony Of The Night* on the PlayStation. That's just the start of it though, as the soundtrack is top notch too, making fine use of the CD audio afforded by its host format, and while

» [PC Engine] Dracula, "I want to create a soothing environment for Richter. Are the candles too much?"

all of that presentation is lovely, it's the gameplay that really stands out. It's arguably the finest of the classic-style *Castlevania* games, dialling back some of the frustrations of earlier entries while offering multiple routes through the game and an extra unlockable character to provide additional replay value. In 2015, **Retro Gamer** readers voted *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* the PC Engine's very best game.

WHY IT'S EXPENSIVE

Konami has been known for its conservative print runs in general, but there are other factors at play here. *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* wasn't released in North America due to the miserable market performance of the TurboGrafx-16, but even in Japan where the PC Engine sold well, it was a format in decline by the autumn of 1993. The game sold 14,436 copies during its first week on sale, and just over 5,000 more over the following weeks on the charts. That isn't the smallest of print runs, but there certainly aren't many copies out there to begin with. As word of the game's quality spread over the years, competition for those few copies has only intensified, and it hasn't really let up as *Castlevania* has retained its popularity up to the present day. As a result, interest in past entries in the series hasn't diminished over time and the price remains high.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES

Konami has seen fit to bring *Castlevania: Rondo Of Blood* back to the market a few times, firstly as part of *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles* for the PSP. This includes a remake of *Rondo Of Blood*, plus the PC Engine original and *Symphony Of The Night*. While it's cheaper, it's still expensive, clocking in at £30-£60. If you're happy with digital games, the most affordable option is *Castlevania Requiem* for the PS4, a collection including *Rondo Of Blood* and *Symphony Of The Night*. That will set you back £15.99, but physical copies go for £70 or more as they were only released through Limited Run Games. The PC Engine Mini released in 2020 also includes the game, and can be found for £75+. Limited Run Games announced an English language release for PC Engine CD in 2021.

» [PC Engine] The Minotaur is 50% bull, 50% man, and 100% a pain in the butt for Richter.

» [PC Engine] The wyvern's fiery breath is almost as hot as the London Underground's Victoria line on a summer day.

THE BOTTOM LINE

PC Engine collectors tend to be a hardcore sort, so it's easy to see how they'd justify the outlay for a game of this quality. For most players though, the availability of cheaper, translated versions on more common hardware means there's no need to shell out so much – you'll still experience a game that really has something special about it, so much so that even Konami couldn't quite recreate the magic with the loose SNES remake, *Vampire's Kiss*.

I'VE GOT IT!

Did these readers end up paying a bloody fortune?

Martin
I bought *Akumajou Dracula X: Chi No Rondo* on 7 May 2011 on eBay for 58 Euros including shipment...

VG Pix
I got my copy around 2019 from a seller in Detroit. It went for about 180 USD and is in pretty good shape. It's the most I've spent on a CD game to this day.

David Shadoff
I got mine sometime around 1994 or 1995, from somebody on the Turbo-list mailing list. I seem to recall it was around $70 or $80 new at the time.

Marc Chaggar
I paid £90 from a Yahoo Japan proxy ten years ago.

Evil-Soft.com
Yes sir! On eBay for $185 many years ago. Prices shot up over $225 right after, so I was happy I got a good deal on it.

Kaiju of the Grotto
First time in 96... $90 at a Die Hard Game Fan in Miami. Someone damaged the manual and I sold it. Second time, $50-ish at Super Potato in Akihabara in like 2007. I still have it!

Matt
Via a local Facebook sale. I wasn't interested in most of the PS1 imports, but once I clocked *Rondo* was on the list I bought everything. He had left an asking price to secure it. Deal secured in local chip shop. It felt dodgy as heck, and no chips were actually purchased!

pwrdwnsys
I paid £80 for a mint condition copy in a private sale from a PC Engine forum in 2010. It was my very first PCE CD game.

Evil-Soft.com
My brother got his from Buyee in Japan for $120.

HITTING THE ARCADE

Darran and his friends had a blast at Arcade Club recently

My friends and I have been talking about visiting Arcade Club for about six months, but that's all it ever was, talk. Luckily, we all have very pushy wives and a social event at Greg's saw the three of them uniting and convincing us to book some much-needed time off. Paul found a suitable travel lodge, Greg was looking for potential nearby retro shops we could visit on the way there and I handled the tickets. With me being a terrible driver, Paul offered to do the chauffeuring and we set off early on a Friday for a long weekend in Bury with the aim to hopefully leave early Sunday morning.

On Saturday we arrived at the venue a good 20 minutes before it was open and were surprised to see a number of other people queuing – not just aging nerds like ourselves, but numerous youngsters too. If you've never visited Arcade Club before the fourth floor is a loving tribute to the early days of the arcades, filled with a cacophony of sounds and the warm glow of monitors displaying some of the most iconic games of all times, from *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* to *Out Run* and *Ridge Racer*.

It worked as a time capsule for my two friends with Greg noting, "I really enjoyed the feeling of playing the games, which I last saw in the wild some 35 plus years ago. I felt like I was in my teens again." Paul was similarly impressed, admitting, "The fourth floor was certainly the most nostalgic for me, and as we got there early we briefly had the floor to ourselves."

We ended up spending a good amount of time on the floor, staying at the venue for a full 11 hours. During that time we briefly visited the floor that catered to younger gamers thanks to an elaborate setup of Xbox 360s for playing *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*, but found most of our remaining playtime spent on the floor dedicated to Japanese games. I'd spent some time before we visited telling everyone about the table-flipping game there so while Paul and Greg floated around the floor playing classics like *Crazy Taxi* and the many impressive shmups on the Candy Cabs, I sought out Taito's bizarre game. It turns out that Greg is a champion table flipper, easily eclipsing both mine and Paul's scores.

The Japanese floor also featured the *Final Fantasy Theatrhythm* arcade game, which I've never encountered before and ended up playing a lot. While I was grumbling about the lack of instructions on many of the games, Paul had a good counter, pointing out that "it goes back to the old days of having fun trying to work out how everything works". That assessment made perfect sense, particularly when you consider the many import games we'd have both played back in the day and I soon saw the lack of instructions as just another set of challenges to overcome.

> "The quality of the machines was a real highlight"
> **PAUL STADDON**

One thing that impressed both Greg and Paul was the high quality of the cabinets**.** While there was the odd game with a faulty controller, or a few machines that weren't working at all, the vast majority were in tip-top condition. "The quality of the machines was a real highlight, all in great condition as well," admits Paul. Interestingly, while Paul and I tried to play as many different games as possible, Greg had other plans. "I focussed on completing games that had a specific nostalgia for me like *Aliens* or ones with the sensory feeling of actually playing like *Operation Wolf*," he says. He then went on to say he put the equivalent of £17 into completing *Dariusburst Another Chronicle EX*, which made the £18 entry fee an absolute bargain.

On the subject of money, both Paul and Greg were impressed by how cheap the day was. "I thought it was amazing value actually," says Paul, "even the food and drink wasn't expensive and I'll certainly go there again." Greg is also eager to return, "It just had a great vibe with something for everyone."

Needless to say, it probably won't take as long to arrange our next visit.

THE BIG FIVE

OUR ARCADE CLUB HIGHLIGHTS

THE FOURTH FLOOR
It's pretty much filled with every classic game you can think of, from *Golden Axe* and *Strider*, to *Mr Do!* and *Donkey Kong*.

ODDITIES
Whether it's playing a touch-screen take on *Cooking Mama* or discovering a mechanical game from the Fifties, there's always something of interest.

PINBALL HEAVEN
There's some brilliant pinball tables on the first floor and we all spent a lot of time enjoying them.

HIGH-SCORE CHASING
There's something satisfying about setting a high score and returning to see it's not been beaten.

THE FOOD
While Arcade Club serves simple food like pizzas and burgers, the quality is very good and the prices are extremely reasonable.

HERE'S GREG TAKING AFTER BURNER FOR A SPIN. IT'S ONE OF SEVERAL GAMES HE COMPLETED.

PAUL CAME SECOND IN OUR TABLE-FLIPPING CHALLENGE. IT'S A GLORIOUSLY SILLY GAME.

PAUL, DARRAN AND GREG TOOK A PICTURE OUTSIDE ARCADE CLUB TO PASS SOME TIME. LOOK HOW HAPPY THEY ALL ARE.
PAUL LOVES RACING GAMES AND I'D OFTEN FIND HIM RETURNING TO THE RIDGE RACER CABINET.
STAR CASTLE
NIBBLER
PAUL LOVED DISCOVERING GAMES LIKE STAR CASTLE AND FOUND HIMSELF GRAVITATING TOWARDS MANY OF THE VECTOR-BASED GAMES.
I SET HIGH SCORES ON STRIDER, SHINOBI, THUNDER FORCE AC AND SEVERAL OTHER GAMES, AND THEY STAYED THERE ALL DAY.
THE FOURTH FLOOR IS ABSOLUTELY AMAZING AND FILLED WITH ALL MANNER OF CLASSICS.
I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED THEATRHYTHM IN THE ARCADES BEFORE. THE CONTROL SYSTEM TOOK A FAIR WHILE TO MASTER.

ARCADE CLUB MEMORIES

Readers on why they love visiting Arcade Club venues

Davey Sloan
Where do you start? So many amazing games and everything is on free play. Sod Disneyland, THIS is The Happiest Place On Earth.

Richard Hazeldine
It's like a time machine, transporting you back to the golden age of the arcades. The only thing missing (thank God) is the stale smell of ciggies and chewing gum stuck to the machines!

Simon Lock
The fact that Arcade Club still exists in 2025 is one and also being consistently awesome.

Robb from 8/16/32bit
The opportunity to play the games without the pressure of running out of money! The fixed entry price and free play setting on the machines means you can enjoy the games.

hitch
Playing with your mates, like you used to as a kid/teenager but this time with beer!

Grace E
I visited Arcade Club in Bury a good few years back, and it was my best arcade experience, next to Pinball Station (Warsaw, Poland), so far. I have to agree with the fixed-price entry definitely taking the pressure off. And the huge selection of games is wonderful, I am sure it's even better now!

Simon Burton
The sheer variety of games on offer, the good food and drinks at great prices and the overall proper arcade experience. Top stuff.

Brian H
Just seeing the glow of the screens and hearing those familiar sounds sent me straight back to my misspent youth. It's a real treat for the senses and emotions.

dmk-one
How you can switch between games naturally, going from one to another. While playing on home systems I tend to stick to one or two games in a single session.

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON SOCIAL MEDIA – **TWITTER.COM/RETROGAMER_MAG**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a copy of one of our classic retro books from our archives. Good luck everyone!

» Darran was working on a *RoboCop* Making Of for Imagine's planned retro mag, but it never went anywhere.

ALL THE RETRO

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I'm a big fan of your mag and have been subscribing in the US since 2010. In issue 269 (Yes, I'm a few months behind a magazine that's a few decades behind), David Perkins wrote that he wanted to see articles about retro toys like Transformers and He-Man. I would do him one better and say I would LOVE to see a Retro Everything magazine covering pop culture a la Nick Thorpe's current Back To The Noughties section. It could cover movies, television, music, and current events any given month. I'd certainly subscribe!
Brigg Barsness

PS: And Darran, It's always nice to see someone with a gorgeous wife that's clearly out of his league. Gives hope to the rest of us!

Funnily enough, Imagine Publishing was going to make this very magazine with Darran as editor in chief, but it was cancelled due just before the incoming Future purchase, so it never went anywhere. And yes, Darran is well aware that he's punching above his weight.

MAD ABOUT MCCREE

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Thanks for the recommendation on *Mad Dog McCree* – it was mentioned in Darran's short piece about *The House Of The Dead: Overkill*. I bought it Amazon as it wasn't expensive, but I'm sure I played this game back in primary school on a trip to the Isle Of Wight many years ago! The game doesn't tell you that you have to put the remote off-screen and press A to reload! It took me a little while to work that out, but it's still great fun.
Keep up the good work all,
Simon Davis

We're glad Darran's piece inspired you to check out *Mad Dog McCree*, Simon. The Wii is rife with great lightgun games, so we should probably do a bigger feature at some point.

ALL THE NES GAMES!

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
An American fan, here. Thank you for sharing positivity and enthusiasm for retro gaming, it's really appreciated. I wanted to see if you all were aware of the North American NES ranking project that Jeff Gerstmann has been doing. It's a multi-year project where he plays and ranks every NES game released in North America. He's well over 500 games in and has new lists every Friday. I would love to see a

» You can follow Jeff's NES adventure by following @jeffgerstmannshow on YouTube.

» [Wii] Simon enjoyed playing through *Mad Dog McCree* recently on the Wii.

STAR LETTER

MOVIE MAGIC

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
As much as I love videogames, I also love movies. While I'm not going to ask you to cover films from the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties in the magazine, I do have a proposal for you that I think would go down very well with readers. How about retooling your old Licence To Kill into a monthly feature? I used to really enjoy reading it and there's so many great games you could still cover. Failing that, how about running The Evolution Of Movie Licences in a future issue? It could look at very early licences like *Kung Fu Master*, move to the popularity of the Ocean Software games and finally cover the dwindling interest in movie licences after the Xbox 360 era. I think this would be a fantastic article, no matter what direction you took it, as it would combine two of my favourite things.
Yours hopefully,
Ben Johnson

» [DS] Darran's been looking for an excuse to cover this forgotten *Thor* game.

This is a fantastic idea, Ben. The team are also big movie buffs so we'd be quite keen on making this work. Have a book for coming up with an idea that will benefit everyone.

Don't forget to follow us online for all the latest retro updates

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» It's great to see features like Covermount Corner going down so well with readers.

piece in the magazine interviewing Jeff about this endeavour. I've never seen anything like it, and I would appreciate your take on it.
Phil from The States

Many thanks for the kind words, Phil. We are aware of Jeff's epic project and will try and sort an interview out.

COVERMOUNT CORNER RULES

Hi **Retro Gamer**,
I just wanted to say how much I love your new features in the mag! Magazine Craft and Secret Service are fantastic but Covermount Corner is my favourite. I really hope you cover the disc that came with issue 31 of *Official PlayStation Magazine UK*, as that was my first demodisc and I discovered the horror and joy of *Resident Evil 2*. It quickly became my favourite videogame and I still own the demodisc today. Please keep these features regular. Thank you all for an amazing magazine, I absolutely adore it.
Richard Peck

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Superhero movies

Our regular cinephiles, Andy and Darran have been yapping away about the latest superhero movies. Both of them really enjoyed James Gunn's reboot of *Superman*, but while they both liked *Fantastic Four: First Steps*, Andy felt the world didn't feel quite as lived in as Superman's. Darran's just glad he only likes two of the four announced Hot Toys figures from *First Steps*, as he's now saved a small fortune.

We're glad you're enjoying the new features Richard, and you'll be pleased to hear they're not going anywhere. We've also not forgotten about the *X-Men* feature you've previously mentioned.

Your say

» [PlayStation 2] It was nice to see a lot of love for the *Sly Raccoon* series.

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite PlayStation 2 platformer?

retrofan01
Sly Cooper. I had a PS2 at the time but didn't discover the series until lockdown. It's a real hidden gem!

Rat Stash
Crash Twinsanity. I know it's not perfect, but I just love it so much, He's trying his best OK?!

Lee Mc
The PS2 is the best generation for the platformer. The *Jak And Daxter* games, *Sly Cooper* but for me the best were *Ratchet & Clank*. Such great gameplay, stunning environments and great characters with such good humour.

Moster Erik
Sly 2. Jumping around on top of buildings and crawling through vents was so cool, it's basically a kids' version of *Assassin's Creed.*

cloudy_nz
I can't decide between *Jak And Daxter* or *Haven: Call Of The King.*

ev
Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy. It's still one of my favourite games of all time!

Gamer lil ico
Klonoa 2 is the best PS2 platformer. Despite a Metacritic score of 91 it's still one of the most underrated games ever.

Pending Change
I don't really do favourites so lets go with the first one that popped into my head after reading the question. *Dr Muto.*

Dathan Smith
It's *Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando* and *Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy* for me.

Keiron Standfield
It gets a bad rep for loading times and no Naughty Dog involvement, but *Crash Bandicoot: Wrath Of Cortex* looked great at the time, and is more fun than *Warped.*

Adam Sadler
The brain says it should be *Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy*, but the heart says *Maximo.* It might be the link to *Ghosts 'N Goblins* that does it for me, honestly.

retro GAMER

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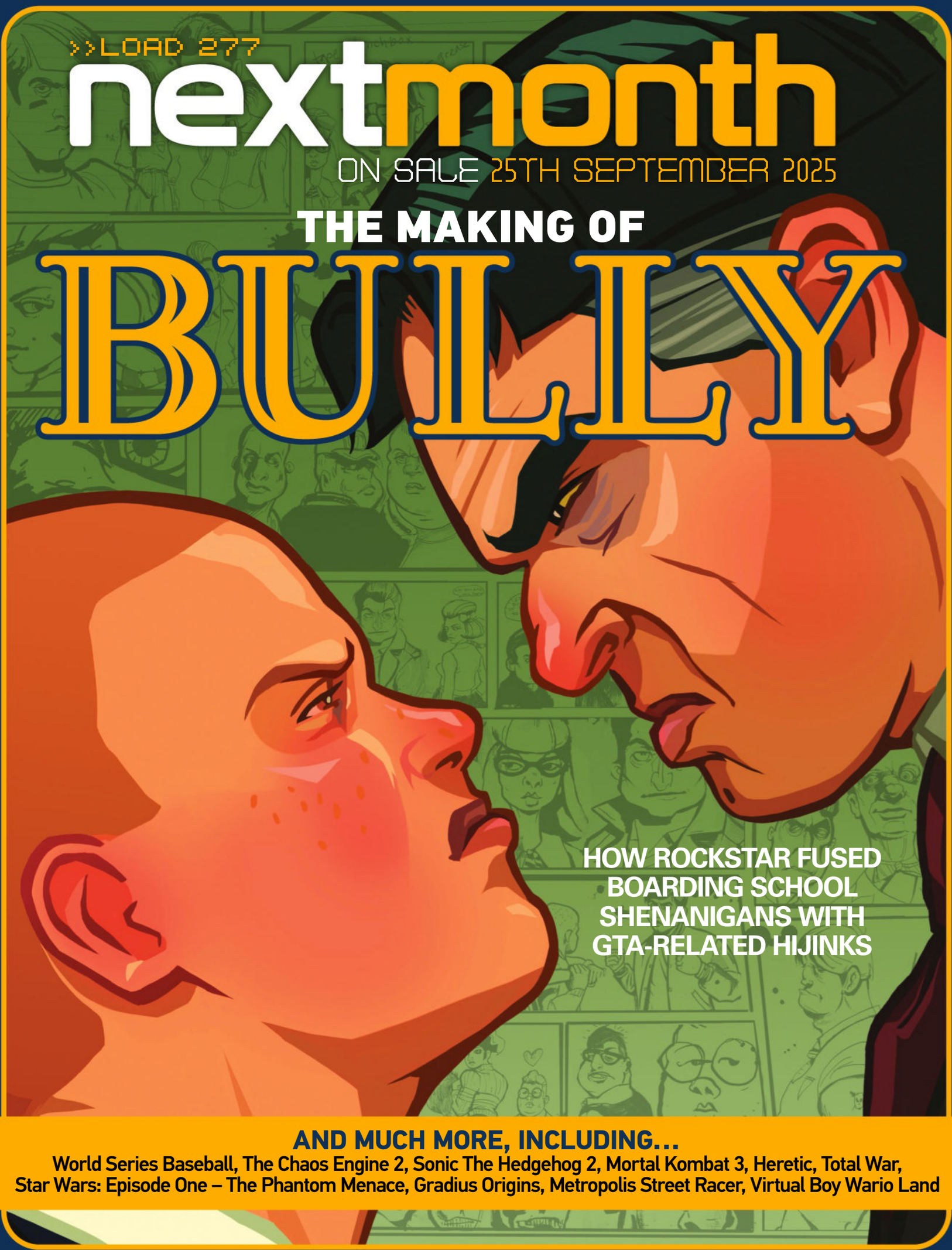
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Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars

CHARITY SHOP GOLD

» WII » 2008 » RED FLY STUDIO

My youngest daughter and I share a lot in common and one of the things we love to do is visit charity shops. I'm always on the lookout for new CDs and games to add to my collection, while Alice scours the many clothes racks and seeks out DVDs starring Paul Dano (her favourite actor). A few weeks ago we were both at loose ends so decided to head into Charminster because it has a good range of charity shops and is quite close to where we live.

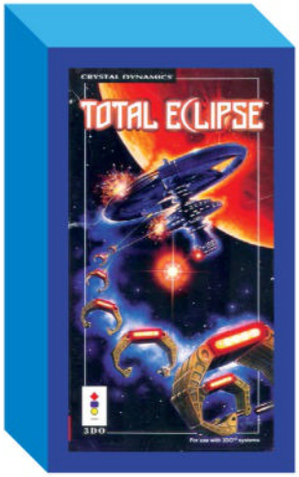
Alice added a new item of clothing and a couple of books to her growing library, while I picked up a number of CDs, including *More Than This*, the greatest hits of Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music. Videogames were thin on the ground, but I did find *Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars* and as it was only a fiver, I picked it up.

Yes, I could have grabbed it from CEX for £3, but I like supporting charities and I don't understand the current discourse from resellers and YouTubers who moan that they can no longer make profit off charity shops because the staff have got wise to the price of retro games and often price them correctly.

Still, I'd heard decent things about the game, so I took it home and fired up the Wii. And do you know what, it's actually pretty good. Yes, I could do without waving the Wii's remote around constantly to attack enemies and it's painfully short, but there's a lot of charm to Red Fly Studio's game. Playing as the wanderer Pax, you soon find yourself embroiled in a bitter conflict between several sentient mushroom tribes and must navigate them while dealing with numerous mutated animals (they've all been transformed by a strange shower of comets). The resourceful Pax can craft weapons from the many real-world everyday items he finds scattered about and must use his brain as well as brawn to solve the game's many challenges. All in all, it is a lot of fun.

I may have overpaid for *Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars*, but I certainly got five pounds worth of entertainment out of it and a worthy charity received my money. That for me is a very big win.

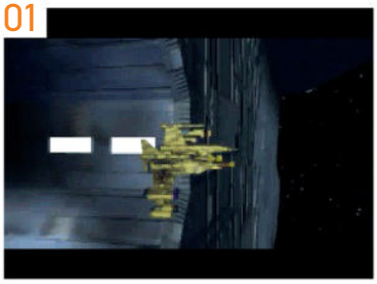
ENDGAME



TOTAL ECLIPSE (3DO, PLAYSTATION, 1994)

» Remember that Jaffa Cakes advert? "Full moon... half-moon... total eclipse!" Brilliant, that was – so brilliant that they don't need to advertise Jaffa Cakes now because everyone still remembers it. So here's a game that has nothing to do with that, because it came out five years before the advert, but it is at least set in space. That's where the moon is, you know?

01

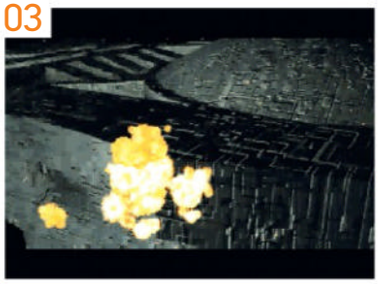


» After navigating your way through an incredibly twisting tunnel, you make it out of the big, bad and frankly enormous mothership safely. Triumphant rock music plays on your in-craft stereo system.

02

» Unfortunately, it doesn't really look like you've done a great deal of damage to it. You're well clear of the thing, but it isn't falling apart or exploding, or anything like that. What a shame, really.

03



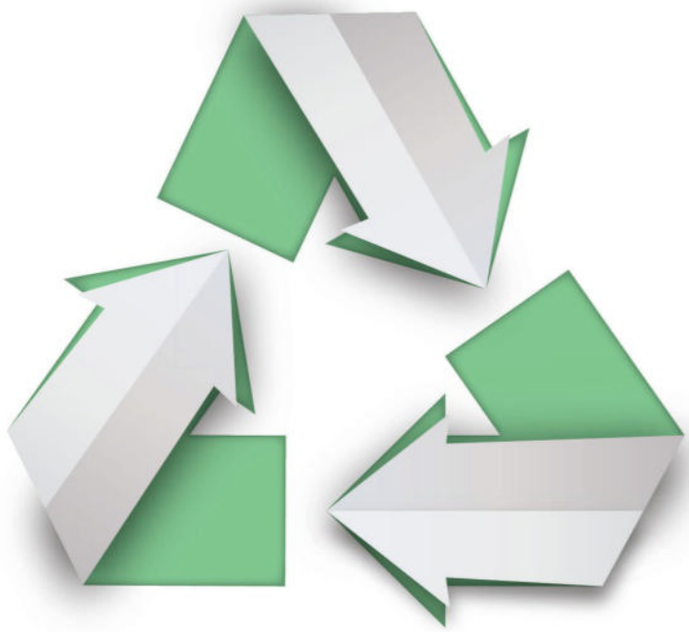
» Oh, *now* the explosions start, way too late to make your exit look properly dramatic. Sure, you've accomplished your mission, but you've done it so competently that it's frankly a little dull.

04

» A *daring* hero would make it out by the skin of their teeth, with the flames close enough to melt their underwear to their posterior. Yeah, the shot of your spaceship set against the exploding behemoth is kind of cool, but is it as cool as showing your friends a toasted rear end?

05

» Still, this guy seems pretty happy with what you've done, so that's pretty good. Incidentally, that's a communication device, not a terrifying robotic replacement mouth. It turns out that even in the age of interplanetary warfare, gamers really love headsets with garish lights.



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